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UNDER THE PAGAN MEGALITH: UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF VIKINGS IN BLACK METAL

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by

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Introduction

Under the Pagan Megalith is a podcast examining the interpretation of "Viking Culture" (Scandinavian warrior culture from 793 CE- 1066 CE) in Black Metal music. The podcast discusses the history of both Black Metal and Vikings, how they intersect, and how the development of the Viking myth, from the historical reality to the pop culture icon, fits the philosophical and aesthetic needs of many of the most influential Black Metal bands.

From the onset of heavy metal in the late 60s and early 70s, fantastical influences were already a big part of the lyrical themes. Examples of this include Led Zeppelin's "Misty Mountain Hop" and the album cover for Black Sabbath's "Paranoid." However, as metal evolved and more extreme subgenres formed, such as Death Metal, Thrash Metal, and eventually the first wave of Black Metal. On Black Metal's onset, the genre's lyrical themes revolved heavily around anti-religious sentiments, typically in the form of Satanism. This later evolved, with bands such as Bathory, taking on a Norse Pagan angle. Bands like Bathory pioneered this, but as the 90s approached, more bands, especially from Norway, adopted Viking aesthetics and themes, partly as a reflection of national pride, partly as a revolution against a Christian-dominant society, and partly as a projection of exoticized strength.

These "goals" of some of the early Black Metal musicians reflect many of the post-Medieval uses of the Vikings, as the stereotypes associated with Vikings today began to take shape, influenced by people and groups ranging from Richard Wagner to the Third Reich. The goal of this podcast is to analyze the use of Vikings in Black Metal, and what the lyrics and statements from the artists can say about the socio-political and philosophical goals of Black Metal. Furthermore, the podcast seeks to establish the evolution of the "pop culture Viking" into a politically right-wing icon, and how those politics, both inadvertently and purposefully, make

their way into Black Metal. Finally, the podcast seeks to investigate how important these larger socio-political and philosophical themes are to Black Metal musicians, and how the Viking themes of early Black Metal have diversified and evolved into the 21st century.

Methodology: Construction and Research Process

Beginning in the Spring of 2025, *Under the Pagan Megalith* was constructed first through the literature review. These sources are primarily scholarly in order for me to understand the academic conversations behind Black Metal and Viking interpretations. These sources were most directly helpful in connecting the historical "Vikings" to the pop culture interpretation, specifically in foundational texts of Wagner and Tacitus, and how those sources led to Nazisim and then modern neo-paganism. My pre-existing knowledge of Black Metal (including lyrical analysis I had done earlier in the research process) allowed me to understand what I was "looking for" when tracing a timeline over 1100 years.

These scholarly sources also allowed me to view the pre-existing writings on Black Metal. While a relatively niche field, there was plenty of research to draw on–primarily analysis of the function, appeal, and goals of Black Metal. That could then be slotted into the more "linear" history of collected sources, such as *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* and popular journalism surrounding Black Metal.

I decided to make *Under the Pagan Megalith* a podcast for a few reasons. I wanted to add a multimedia angle to the project, as I have spent a lot of time working in that field and am very aware of how necessary those skills are to the 21st-century journalist. Podcasting in particular has been a major part of my journalistic career, going back to my high school days and through my time at Ohio University. Attempting a mini-documentary, I figured, would be too ambitious considering the scope of the project up to that point. I also have not enjoyed a lot of my time

behind the camera, so I decided that trying to force video into the project would hinder my enjoyment and, therefore, my motivation.

Methodology: Recording and Editing

Under the Pagan Megalith was recorded in "The Pod" at the Schoonover Center at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. The room is equipped with a NAME OF MIC, which is controlled via a RODECASTER. Despite the room's four microphones, only one was used, as I read a physically printed version of the podcast scripts while recording. The podcast was primarily recorded in two major sessions.

Under the Pagan Megalith was edited via Descript and Adobe Audition. Descript was chosen for ease of access. The platform's primary distinguishing feature is that it automatically transcribes audio and allows for editing of that transcript via a Google or Word Document. The changes made to the transcript are then automatically applied to the audio. Descript also includes features to detect when multiple takes of similar lines were given. These features provide for a much smoother and faster editing process than manual Audition or Audacity edits allow. Audition was used, however, for its multi-track feature once the base audio was completed and when sound effects, voice acting, and music needed to be added. Audition allowed for much more precise spot editing where needed.

A major concern with the project was how to incorporate audio that wasn't simply a monologue. My past experience with podcasting, particularly *Depths of Music*, established in 2021, suffered constantly from this very issue. The decision was made to have outside volunteers read lengthy interview quotes. While I was unable to get guests to read quotes that directly matched the voices of the original sources, I determined that what mattered the most was just getting other people in the audio who were not me. Voice actors were allowed to have a say in

what lines they recorded, as well as being credited at the end. Voice actors were also warned in advance of some of the sensitive content present in some of the quotes, and we would work together to fill the roles while keeping everyone comfortable.

This voice actor recruiting process resulted in eight unique actors, not including myself, who covered a total of 28 lines over the four episodes of the show. Additionally to further break up vocal monotony, sound effects were used to create ambiance and soundscapes were they were deemed necessary. This was primarily used for "dramatic moments", such as the church burning segments of Episode 1 and the Lindesvarne raid that opens Episode 2. More minimal sound effects were used in the intros to Episodes 1, 3 and 4, in order to serve as the "hook" for the listener.

While original interviews with some of the subjects were part of the original plan for the podcast, there were a few reasons they had to be cut from the final project. Primarily, the scripting process was significantly more involved and time-consuming than originally planned. In developing the scripts, we never reached a moment where I felt confident enough in where I'd place interviews or what questions I could ask guests that wouldn't just be filled in with preexisting quotes.

Additionally, a great majority of the artists I was seeking quotes from–such as members of Mayhem, Bathory, or Venom–had already explained the rationale behind things such as their implementation of Viking culture in previous interviews. These sources were often contemporary to the time this music was released, which I determined were better suited to the historical nature of the podcast. I also had concerns about my ability to get interview access to these artists. In my experience interviewing bands for publications such as *People* or *WOUB*, artists typically only do press to promote an upcoming project, tour, etc. Considering *Under The Pagan Megalith* was mostly reflective in nature, it wouldn't make sense for bands to be able to promote their new

work in these interviews. Additionally, most of my success in obtaining artist access has come with the backing of *People* or *WOUB*, which both hold strong reputations as news sources; my name, independently, does not, and while I have basic connections with some PR representatives, I was skeptical that bands would be interested in doing this kind of project. Books such as *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* featured fantastic interviews with bands, but it had the backing of *Decibel Magazine,* one of the most well-respected metal-based journalistic publications, and was written by Dayal Patterson, a metal journalist who has the credibility and reputation to make these interviews happen.

Literature Review

To get a broad sense of Viking history, especially in comparison to the stereotypes, Eleanor Barraclough tackles some of the history of the Vikings from the perspective of reaching beyond the preconceived notions about the group, particularly those who were adopted by the Nazis and other white supremacist groups (Barraclough 2018). The "Viking Age" is often dated to begin with the attack on the island monastery of Lindisfarne in 793, as the raiders attacked various settlements through the next century, including the 845 siege of Paris (Barraclough 2018). These raids slowed in 911 when a Norwegian named Rollo was given land in Northern France in exchange for swearing allegiance to the king and being baptised (Barraclough 2018). Rollo's domain then served as a buffer between King Charles the Simple and other Viking invaders (Barraclough 2018). According to Barraclough, there is material evidence to state that the Norse adopted Frankish material culture by the early 11th century (Barraclough 2018). The pattern of adaptation appears to be the norm across places such as modern Russia and England, as well, where Scandinavian settlers became more focused on farming in their new territory, rather than raiding once they established themselves and started having families (Barraclough

2018). Barraclough's account of Viking history counters the narrative of some BM artists, who depict the Vikings as invaders and settlers (Barraclough 2018). Expansion and intermingling with the local population contrasts Nazi-era and, by extension, NSBM ideas of "racial purity" as fundamentally inaccurate to the true history of the Vikings (Barraclough 2018). The Vikings were raiders and engaged in violent activities, but Barraclough argues that "They were also masters of cultural adaptation and integration" (Barraclough 2018). The extent of this adaptation is evident in the Vikings' truly global reach, spanning from North America, Scandinavia, and the Arctic to the Mediterranean and the modern Middle East (Barraclough 2018).

Viking Heritage Magazine discusses the creation of the modern pop-culture Vikings (Johni Langer 2002). The co-opting of Vikings becomes mainstream with the operas of Richard Wagner in 1869, developing the Norse archetypes based on the "common knowledge of the time" (Langer 2002). These depcition were an attempt to separate the Norse gods visually from the Greco-Roman pantheon, whose visual aesthetic had defined all things "spiritual"(Johni Langer 2002). These early depictions by Wagner and his contemporaries weren't exactly trying to portray an "accurate" history (Langer 2002). Rather, they were overt attempts at glorifying the past and demonstrating Germanic unity (Langer 2002).

These pop culture stereotypes of Vikings, as well as their political purpose of panGermanic unification, survived into the Nazi co-option of Vikings, as well as BM (Langer 2002). These interpretations also inform the "fantasy" that metalheads may be chasing when listening to BM (Langer 2002). C. B. Krerb's article about the reception of Tacitus is a key example of how Germanic and Scandinavian identity was formed and then appropriated by later parties (Krebs 2010). Originally written by Roman author Tacitus, it's a survey of the Germanic people beyond Rome's borders to understand their culture better (Krebs 2010). The book depicts the Germanic

tribes as very war-like and savage, something that was meant to elicit fear and scorn in the Romans (Krebs 2010).

However, the book became a lynchpin for German history and national identity around the time of the Renaissance (Krebs 2010). As Italian Humanism centered on the "rediscovery" of Classical Greek and Roman works, the Germania allowed citizens of the region to have their own origin, which could be challenged by Italians of the time (Krebs 2010). The depiction of strength and savagery became a source of national pride and can be seen at the heart of some of the fascist movements that would take hold in the region, such as Nazisim (Krebs 2010).

Barbora Žiačková analyses the co-opting of Vikings by alt-right groups, why they'd be appealing, and how that conflicts with the fluid nature of history (Žiačková, 2019). She argues that archaeology, first and the internet second, has allowed for a democratization of historical knowledge. Ease of access like this allows for groups of people to interpret history however they want, via reading online and proclaiming themselves experts through the interpretation of artifacts (Žiačková, 2019). This self-assigned "expert" status allows for a narrative to be formed based on this interpretation. From this view, when"academic elite"supports scholarship that conflicts with this information, they're shunned and discredited as being based on laypeople's thinking that they have superior knowledge (Žiačková, 2019). Additionally, the perspective of archeology allows for symbols to be created (Žiačková, 2019).

This up close experience with artifacts have led to people feeling deeply connected to artifacts as part of their heritage (Žiačková, 2019). This new information can elicit the emotional connection that can be triggered by challenges to one's personal identity (Žiačková, 2019). Historically, archeology and history have commonly pushed narratives. These narratives are pushed mainly because they need to appeal to some sort of donor, which is historically the government (Žiačková, 2019). This phenomenon has led to archeology and history being funded

just to promote nationalistic or other propagandist purposes (Žiačková, 2019). Therefore, historians and archaeologists have a hard time convincing the public to “change their mind, as they can be seen as 'working for an agenda' by skeptics (Žiačková, 2019). All of **this** is key in talking about the interpretation of Vikings. Considering how important a symbol the Vikings represent to some Scandinavians and how heavily they’ve been mythologized, any attempt at a correction of the narrative is met with controversy and pushback (Žiačková, 2019). The pushback academics receive can serve as a further example of how BM and other Viking media have remained “inaccurate”, as rocking the boat will break the illusion that fans of the media are chasing and emotionally attached to.

Steven Kale argues in his article for Cambridge University Press that Arthur de Gobineau marks a sharp turning point in early Romantic-era “racial science” (Kale 2010). Gobineau’s essay, 1853’s *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races,* served not only as a template for racial discrimination with a “biological” background, but he also cites Norwegians and Germans as the superior races (Kale 2010). These assertions lead to Gobineau often being credited as the inventor of the “Aryan Race” concept, which would be a founding principle for Nazisim (Kale 2010).

Adam Hockman’s review and analysis of Jon Reyne Kyllingstad’s “Measuring the Master Race” provides insight into the way Norwegian and Scandinavian history of the “Viking Age” has been appropriated by some of the forefathers of Nazi ideology (Hockman 2014). Nazi ideology is largely based on German racial superiority, or the superiority of the “Aryan” race. Hocman showcases how Kyllingstad connects the “Aryan” race as a development of both German and Norwegian anthropology of the late 19th and early 20th century. In the 1830s and 40s, Scandinavian scientists began to theorize that different “races” migrated to Europe at

varying times in prehistory, evolving into the European races of today (Hockman 2014). The theory was based on early connections between Sanskrit and European languages.

Later, Ander Retzius developed the idea of the "cephalic index", which attempts to connect skull breadth to mental capacity (Hockman 2014). He separated people into two main groups, "dolichocephalic" (long-skulled) and "brachycephalic" (short-skulled), arguing that dolichocephalic people are inherently superior (Hockman 2014). He argued that the native Europeans, the Sami, and later, the Basques, were brachycephalic and therefore destined to be conquered by the dolichocephalic Indo-Europeans, who would found "Western Civilization" (Hockman 2014). Rudolf Keyser translates the idea into a Scandinavian context by applying this concept to the Goths and Norwegians (Hockman 2014). He also adds that patriarchal-based households are a core tenet of Norwegian society (Hockman 2014).

Peter Munch makes a similar argument, claiming the existence of four human races, the "best" of which is the Iranians (later morphed into "Aryan") who became strong via their long migration to Europe and the conquering of the Sami people (Hockman 2014). After a brief pause, this racial "science" returned to popularity in the 1890s. During this time, Norwegian taxonomists found a common "long-skulled" Germanic group, which was later dubbed "Vikingstypen" (Hockman 2014). Carl Arbo agreed that the long skull, blond hair, and blue eyes were the characteristics of the true Germanic race, and said "pure" race had been muddied by "race mixing" over time (Hockman 2014). He also argues that rather than migrants, the European people were indigenous to Northern Germany and responsible for all of European history (Hockman 2014). Andreas Hamsen added that "long-skulled" people were naturally inclined to love freedom (Hockman 2014). While "short-skulled" people also craved equal rights, they were not capable or worthy of receiving them (Hockman 2014).

In the interwar period, this branch of science resurfaced in Germany, becoming integral to the rising Nazi party (Hockman 2014). The pre-World War II era is notable for showcasing the scientific development of concepts like the Aryan race and showcasing how Norwegian nationalism has been embedded into Nazisim since its inception (Hockman 2014).

Adrian Neher of Charleton College showcases the direct appropriation of the Vikings by Nazis, mainly via propaganda posters. These posters emerged in the aftermath of Germany's invasion of Norway in 1940 as part of Operation Weserübung (Neher 2017). The Nazis drew on the myth of "shared history" with Norwegians, depicting Nazi soldiers in Viking armor and weapons, attempting to create a "neo-pagan religion of the blood" that stressed the "right" of the Aryans (ie, Germans and Scandinavians) to conquer the rest of the world. Even the Schutzstaffel (SS), the elite paramilitary unit responsible for Nazi territory, got its logo from Guido Von List's 1902 Armanen Runes (Neher 2017).

Egil Asprem details the history of Norwegian Paganism (Asprem 2008). Starting in the early 20th century, and drawing from the Volkisch movement, Alexander Rud Mills was the first figurehead of Odinism. Mills depicts Odinism as "a cosmic battle" between the Pagan and JudeoChristian religions (Asprem 2008). While there are some religious components, it seems this was primarily a means to push a fascist agenda, according to Asprem (Asprem 2008). The movement was then exported to the United States via Else Christen in the 1960s, who founded the Odin Fellowship (Asprem 2008). She also promotes White supremacy and "warrior ethics" associated with Vikings at the time (Asprem 2008). She also adds that the Norse Gods are "genetic archetypes for Scandinavian people"(Asprem 2008). The literal genetic connection not only adds to the racial purity argument but also allows for the inclusion of United States citizens of

Scandinavian descent.

In the 1970s, more organizations popped up that focused more on the religious aspect of Heathenism and are largely apolitical, under the umbrella of "Asatru"; however, some more politically-minded Heathen groups also identify under this label (Asprem 2008). In Norway, the concept of revivalist heathenism goes back to the 30s, which included some fascist members. However, as Hitler became more imperialist towards other European countries, Norwegians, even those who had supported the Nazis, stopped supporting the group (Asprem 2008).

After the war, most pro-Nazi sentiments were all but eliminated in Norway, only to return in the 1980s (Asprem 2008). Inspired by Western movements, primarily under the banner of Astrau and Bifrost. Some members of Bifrost broke off in 1998, partially due to racial disagreements, to form Foreningen Forn Sed (Asprem 2008). Most early Norwegian Asatru members entered from a place of interest in magic and history (Asprem 2008). Later, as the Satanic Panic made its way from the United States to Norway, sects of BM started acting out in order to gain media attention and fame (Asprem 2008). Starting with Satanism, they soon adopt Heathen ideals, mainly following the lead of Varg, who has defined his Heathenism in a similar way to other Neo-Nazis (Asprem 2008). Primarily as a celebration of the "Aryan past" and the need to return to it, as opposed to Christianity, which is viewed as the oppressor (Asprem 2008). The media attention gave all Norwegian Pagans the reputation of being Nazis (Asprem 2008). While some groups did not address this stereotype or stayed in the middle ground, groups such as Bifrost and Vigrid took a hard stance (Asprem 2008). The former is staunchly anti-racist, while the other encourages Neo-Nazi thinking (Asprem 2008).

Shannon Weber's article about White supremacy and Neo-paganism provides insightful context into the American side of Heathenism (Weber 2018). In addition to showcasing another example of Viking history and mythology being used to push Neo-Nazi agendas, Webber's article allows for connections to be made between American Odinists and some of BM's rhetoric

(Weber 2018). Americans use "Vinland" as a way to claim "indigenous ownership" of America while still maintaining the violent, conqueror, pop-culture image of Vikings (Weber 2018). American interpretation reflects some BM artists' portrayal and interpretation of their Viking ancestry

(Weber 2018). Additionally, there's the idea that Heathenry represents a "pre-Jewish" and "indigenously white" religion for people of European descent (Weber 2018). Establishing "shared history" unites Americans and Scandinavians in protecting their "Aryan Race" from things such as immigration and interracial marriage (Weber 2018).

Dayal Patterson's *History of the Cult: Expanded and Revised Edition* is a comprehensive overview of Black Metal's history and culture. The book provides many quotes from notable Black Metal musicians who explain some of the motivations behind their incorporation of Vikings into music. According to the interviews gathered by Patterson, it seems the majority of the bands came to Vikings through a combination of romanticizing a masculine, pagan past, national pride, and wanting to rebel against the Christian authority (Patterson 2023). Patterson also takes sections of the book to argue about some of the philosophical aspects of BM. He argues that the genre's most consistent tenet is individuality (Patterson 2023). The focus on individuality prevents any other core beliefs from taking hold in BM; a group mentality is against the spirit of BM (Patterson 2023). He backs this point by providing numerous examples of BM artists advocating for free speech, even when it opposes their own political beliefs, and he quotes influential BM artists saying that BM isn't the place for politics—that politics are "better left to punk rock" (Patterson 2023). Patterson acknowledges modern movements that move toward openly political BM, but he notes that this is more of a recent phenomenon and that its political messaging keeps it from grabbing the mainstream BM audience.

Kennet Granholm argues that heathenism in BM can partially be attributed to the phenomena of Orientalism, where a group of people, called an "other," are exoticized and are the subject of fascination because of how different they are (Granholm 2011). Examples of this can be seen throughout human history, such as the Egyptomania of the 1920s or the Renaissance's fascination with the Classical world. Especially in the case of the latter, the "other" is portrayed in a positive light, as something to be aspired to, a dynamic that can readily be applied to some BM artists and fans and pre-Christian Scandinavians, as they "aspire" to return to this idealized version of their past (Granholm 2011). Granholm also argues that the love of Paganism specifically comes from the Enlightenment, and later the Romantic Period, as the world became more secular and some people thought "nature is alive, divine and valuable in itself-not simply animated by the influence of God"(Granholm 2011). The philosophical development led to an urge to reconnect with a more "organic" or "natural" religion, such as Paganism (Granholm 2011).

Coupled with the rise of Nationalism, the popularity of Paganism as an original religion to Scandinavians took root (Granholm 2011). A similar phenomenon, based around a "folkspirit" or a Volkggeist, emerged in Germany (Granholm 2011). The reference for this spirit later developed into the Volkisch movement, which added an element of impending doom, as the Volkisch movement believed the "ethnic uniqueness of the German folk" was under attack by outside influence (Granholm 2011). The Volkish movement can be seen not only as a clear ancestor of Nazisim but also as a mirror to some of BM's love of the Vikings and Paganism (Granholm 2011). The Volkish movement represents the roots of their country, their race, and themselves (Granholm 2011).

Granholm also argues that this “search for authenticity” is at the core of the rebellious and counter-culture nature of rock music, just taken to the extreme (Granholm 2011). Miroslav Vrzal interprets the church burnings in the early 1990s at the dawn of the second wave of Norwegian Black Metal as a reflection of the terroristic goals of the BM scene (Vrzal 2018). With the purpose of drawing attention from the media while spreading their message in the most overt way possible, the church burnings, especially in 1992, can be seen as a “success”(Vrzal 2018). BM became permanently tied with both Satanism and, eventually, Pagan/Heathenism in Norway because of these massive media incidents (alongside some notable murders by members of the scene(Vrzal 2018).

Despite what some BM artists have said, both at the time and after, about their love of Heathen religion, Vrzal argues that the church burnings were a retaliation against the Christian establishment, more than a well-informed love of Norwegian history (Vrzal 2018). Imke Von Helden argues that Viking Metal serves as a means to depict a sense of masculinity, freedom, and identity to its audience (Helden 2010). Despite the fact that Helden criticized the historical knowledge of bands like Amon Amarth, he argues that it does not matter (Helden 2010). Vikings have an established image and ethos in pop culture, and when fans go searching for Viking Metal, they’re more interested in the image rather than the truth (Helden 2010).

This provides an important counterargument to the idea of “historical accuracy” in Viking or Black Metal, as the success of these bands may suggest that even if the Vikings were depicted in a historically sound way, it wouldn’t resonate with the same audience or even any audience at all. Floran Heesch discusses the Viking Metal band Amon Amarth's portrayal of Vikings in the song "In Pursuit of Vikings" and how it connects to Romantic ideas of Vikings (Heesch 2010). These ideas were based on the operas of Richard Wagner and the first-hand accounts of terrified Christians recounting Viking raids (Heesch 2010). These accounts of terror

and slander by the Christian citizens were picked up by nationalists and turned into "proof" of how violent, ruthless, and awe-inspiring Vikings were (Heesch 2010). Heesh argues that this portrayal, coupled with Amon Amarth's death metal style (deep growled vocals and down-tuned, chugging guitars), invokes this hyper-masculine fantasy of Vikings (Heesch 2010). While Amon Amarth isn't a BM band, this similar philosophy can be seen employed within BM (Heesch 2010).

Aleksandra Michalewicz connects BM musicians to superheroes by drawing parallels between a superhero's costume and the BM aesthetic (Michalewicz 2005). While Michalewicz concedes that, upon first glance, BM musicians may appear to be more visually similar to villains, BM musicians idealistically have more in common with heroes (Michalewicz 2005). They are meant to be admired by the audience for their power, revolutionary spirit, and "superhuman" abilities (such as musical virtuosity) (Michalewicz 2005). The transformation into a "superhuman" is clearly intentional on the part of black metal musicians, and it can be seen as another motivation to connect with Vikings as a "heroic" part of the Scandinavian past (Michalewicz 2005). Additionally, the ability to become "superhuman" can be another leading factor into Nazi thinking on the part of BM artists; as superhumans can be re-interpreted as a "superior race", which quickly turns into racism (Michalewicz 2005).

BM and Viking metal primarily view the Arctic as a cold, lifeless, and unforgiving place (Sellheim 2016). While Nikolas Sellheim argues that this is an inaccurate interpretation of the region, this depiction has stuck with BM due to how it fits the idealistic aims of the subgenre (Sellheim 2016). BM's nihilism matches well with the perceived lifelessness of the Arctic, as well as being hostile and dangerous, which are also features of BM (Sellheim 2016). With BM's focus on protecting the home front, it's important that said home front is depicted as having natural characteristics that mirror BM's ethos (Sellheim 2016).

Marcus Moberg provides a definition of "alt spirituality" as a new wave of religion, based largely on the self and connection with a natural, mythical past (Moberg 2009). BM's interpretation of Satanism and Heathenism follows in these footsteps, not only for shock value but because it aligns with the genre's other idealistic beliefs, such as rebellion against a Christian status quo (Moberg 2009). In the case of BM, the jump between Satanism and Heathenism is a sign that these religions are primarily in BM because of what they oppose rather than what they represent (Moberg 2009). While that's fairly in line with Satanism, Heathenism draws on a preexisting religious tradition that existed prior to, and before the opposition from Christianity (Moberg 2009). The sub-genre of Ritual Black Metal reflects a more direct, spiritual extension of BM. Similar to standard BM, it's an evolution into more transgressive material via religion (Granholm 2013). Some of these artists argue that the spiritual and religious aspects of BM are the "true core" of the genre (Granholm 2013). They claim that these lyrical themes represent the true breaking from Christian norms, rather than the aggressive sonic elements (Granholm 2013). These examples provide another insight into the role religion plays in BM, showcasing not only the truly devout among the scene but also giving another angle to the argument of "What makes Black Metal, Black Metal?"

Ryan Buesnel's article argues that NSBM exists as a spin-off of BM by taking the ideology at the root of the genre (nihilism, anti-Christianity) and mixing it with racism as a way to target "invaders that threaten the Aryan nation". While there has been an active shunning of NSBM by the general modern BM scene, the two philosophies can be fundamentally linked. The idea of "returning to the roots" and "pagan heritage" can easily lead to race-based glorification, even if it's not super common. Fischer argues that BM serves as a vehicle for Nazi ideas because of shared interests in mythology, history, and glorification of the past (Fischer 2022). Nazi love of Norse mythology connects to the Volkisch movement, a pride in national history, alongside

“creative energy and a sense of individuality”(Fischer 2022).

Guido von List and Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels were the first to make this serve political/nationalistic means (Fischer 2022). The efforts of List and Liebenfels led to the glorification of historical people as “heroic Aryan God men”(Fischer 2022). These ideas were adopted by the Thule Society, then the Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, which later became the Nazi Party. After WWII, groups like the Odin Fellowship argued that Norse mythology was the core of the “Aryan soul” (Fischer 2022).

BM is also sonically aggressive and transversive (Fischer 2022). Therefore, a sonically radical genre naturally lends itself to radical people with radical thoughts (Fischer 2022). Kingsepp argues that BM is fundamentally rebellious, primarily in the form of being antiChristian (Kingsepp 2011). In the Western world, “Christian values” play a large role in shaping the morality of the general population (Kingsepp 2011). As BM is a rebellion against that system, it attempts to find and glorify “evil” as an opposition to the light of Christianity (Kingsepp 2011). Most obviously, this leads to Satanism, the most direct, oppositional force to a Judeo-Christian God (Kingsepp 2011).

The same can be extrapolated to the Vikings, who conflicted with Christians for significant portions of their history (Kingsepp 2011). Further, it leads to Nazis, who are considered one of history’s most objective “evils” and are therefore a “subversion” and “threat” to societal norms (Kingsepp 2011). Furthermore, the use of Nazi imagery raises the bar on rock, and especially metal’s “shock value”, which is very important as a short-term gain, and attention grab when attempting to dismantle the system (Kingsepp 2011).

Laura Taylor argues that BM's racism isn't a novel concept, but rather a derivative of popular Norwegian racism (Taylor 2010). Since 1770, the Norwegian national identity has been defined by opposition, first to the Danes and other Europeans (Taylor 2010). Then, once the

country gained independence, the focus shifted to modern globalism, the EU, and immigration (Taylor 2010).

Norwegian BM serves as an extension of that identity, glorifying a masculine Viking past while rejecting "soft" modernity (Taylor 2010). While the extent to which some BM artists express themselves can be seen as extreme, the core ideas of opposition and national pride have a long history within Norwegian politics itself (Taylor 2010). Karl Spracken argues that BM is a "neo-tribe", or a group of people who section themselves off by music and culture. BM tends to be elitist and a group hellbent on the destruction of humanity and celebrating the overall evil of the human race.

On www.blackmetal.uk, fans debated NSBM's place in the movement, with some arguing that the specific hatred of people like Jews is antithetical to a subgenre where everyone should be hated. On the other hand, some fans argue that if NSBM spreads death, it's aligned with the BM cause, and it's worthy. They argue it's a "freedom of expression" that can't and shouldn't be infringed.

Edward Clough's examination of the black metal band Zeal and Ardor's exploration of Satanism provides an important counter to the second wave of Norwegian Black Metal via the band's incorporation of African-American folk spirituals (Clough 2021). Zeal and Ardor retain the anti-Christian sentiments of other BM bands but point their anger at white, Christian slave owners in a sort of historical fantasy where slaves rejected Christianity as a religion of their captors (Clough 2021). In this way, the spirit of Zeal and Ardor is true to the rebellion of bands like Mayhem and Burzum, but it's framed through a different cultural and racial lens (Clough 2021). The rebellious aspect, along with the band's celebration of black culture, sets Zeal and Ardor as an example of the anger of black metal being cross-cultural while also refuting the idea

that the genre's anti-religious sentiments are inherently tied to or lead to NSBM or any such fascist ideals (Clough 2021).

Through my analysis of the above sources, I have come to the following conclusions about the questions posed by my professional project. First, the use of Vikings in Black Metal is largely ahistorical. Major bands in the genre, such as Bathory, primarily use the "pop culture" Viking rather than the historical reality.

Additionally, applying any consistent philosophy to Black Metal is, in a sense, antithetical to Black Metal's ethos. As is effectively argued in Patterson's book, the only things that unite Black Metal are general negativity, anti-religious sentiments, and individuality, the latter of which prevents BM from retaining any core philosophy. While BM had more traits in common early on, as the genre has expanded, the definition of what defines BM lyrically or thematically is far less clear. Therefore, reattaching political ideologies to BM from any side of the spectrum is nearly impossible. The comparatively small interest can also be seen in how politically motivated genres remain relatively niche, such as NSBM or RABM (Red and Anarchist Black Metal). Some genres' most notable bands, such as Panopticon and in RABM, and Absurd and Thor's Hammer in NSBM, aren't on Spotify.

Interviews given by artists from across BM's timeline, most of them attempt to avoid politics to the best of their ability. Some artists, such as Euronymous from Mayhem, an admitted communist, thought politics was best left in the hands of punk rock, as noted above. Meanwhile, Varg Vikernes puts his politics on center stage in interviews and on his website, but he keeps it relatively far away from the lyrical content of Burzum. Even new bands like Blackbraid, who are sometimes labeled as an "answer" or "alternative" to NSBM, aren't made in response to anything, but rather a response to the wider world or just the expression of the artist.

It must also be considered that BM is not explicitly a lyrical genre. Singers shriek in a way that intentionally makes them sound inhuman and incomprehensible. The lack of vocal clarity, coupled with intentionally bad production, means it's harder to decipher what BM singers are saying, making it harder to analyze those words. BM's emotional core is in its harsh sounds rather than the words being said, which puts it in line with other non-lyrical genres of music.

The inability to discern a clear philosophical identity for BM beyond a few simple characteristics means that Vikings serve the few philosophical principles, such as being an antiChristian force, which appeals to the anti-religious nature of black metal. Being antiChristian is the main overlap between the use of Vikings and Satanism in Black Metal. Vikings are seen as warriors against a Christian world, just as Satan is an oppositional force to God. The religious overlap is also supported by an ideological one, as the Satanist groups of the time, mostly based on the writings of Anton LeVey, also believed in their own superiority and right of conquest over the weak, a trait Black Metal artists attributed to Vikings.

Promotion and Release

The promotion and release of *Under the Pagan Megalith* will commence following the submission and approval of this project to the Honors Tutorial College. Based on when these are approved, I will begin a social media rollout for the project. The rollout will begin with an official announcement of the project via my personal social media, on my personal social media accounts, as well as on new accounts created for the sole purpose of promoting *Under The Pagan Megalith*. The announcement will take place following the first draft's submission on March 27, 2026, whereupon I will launch the pages on streaming services (Apple, Spotify, etc) for *Under The Pagan Megalith*. Launching ahead of release will allow interested viewers to follow the show so that they will be notified when the episodes begin to release. The

announcement will also serve as the rollout of our logo, designed by me using royalty-free images and text. The introduction to Episode 1 was released on April 3rd as the "trailer" for Under The Pagan Megalith, and will serve as the audio sampler for attendants of the Ohio University Research Expo.

This process will be completed before the Ohio University Research Expo on April 7th, so that viewers of my presentation at said fair will have an actionable way to follow the show and be notified upon its release. In terms of the final release of *Under The Pagan Megalith*, some possible, but not final, dates have been chosen for various reasons.

April 17 or 24: These represent the soonest dates the podcast could release following the research fair.

May 23: Five-year anniversary of my first podcast, *Depths of Music*

June 6: The anniversary of the burning of the Fantoff Church

June 8: The anniversary of the raid on Lindesvarne

Considering the length of the podcast was shorter than expected, the podcast will be released with all four episodes dropping simultaneously on the chosen release date.

Beyond promotion at the research fair, *Under the Pagan Megalith* will be promoted via a variety of means. First, I will produce a series of social media posts/videos to explain the project, the process of creating it, and why viewers should be excited to watch it. Secondly, the aforementioned trailer was released ahead of the Research Expo. The expo will serve as the "public display" portion of my podcast with my poster prominently featuring a QR code to presave the podcast so that viewers will be notified when it goes live. Posters will be created with the logo and put up with QR codes to the show's page. These posters will be placed locally, where I reside at the time (likely in Athens, Ohio, or in Charlotte, North Carolina).

Reflection

Looking back on the creation process of *Under The Pagan Megalith*, I am proud of my ability to keep a majority of my scripts tight and focused while maintaining a consistent work effort through the process. The work of creating the podcast was incredibly draining, and due to my self-imposed deadlines, I had to push through burnout more than I have ever had to for a journalistic project. The project was successful as an exercise in discipline and detail-orientation, both of which were things I'm either not as proficient in or find incredibly unpleasant. I was also happy to have been forced to work in a more formal style. In journalism, I have always excelled in personality-driven, long-winded, casual writing. Having to spend a whole year focused on delivering precise, focused reporting on extremely complex and sensitive topics was deeply rigorous.

Like any project, *Under The Pagan Megalith* would've been better with more breathing room for me to work only when I was inspired. Of course, for the scope of an Honors Tutorial College Professional Project, that was impossible. This project was also a challenge due to my personal expectations toward the project. As with the gravity of being the final piece of my college career, I felt immense pressure to make this project fit my perfect vision. I had to learn to balance striving towards those ideas and ambitions while being realistic with myself. This anxiety led me to delay key steps, such as recording further than I'd like, as I spent too much time checking my scripts due to my extreme anxiety over them being "good enough" and factually flawless. All of that said, overall I believe I was effective in making use of the time I had, and I was still able to deliver a solid piece that was able to accurately portrayed its information while also presenting a meaningful and thought-provoking conclusion.

If I had more time and independent connections, I would've leaned more heavily into interviews conducted personally with artists to explain themselves more directly, primarily in the

final episode. I also would have begun working on scripts sooner, likely following the construction of the literature review, as done in the spring of 2025. Upon returning to the project, my intensive summer meant that I had to take longer than I would've liked when it came to refamiliarizing myself with the material before I could begin planning. Additionally, I would've used the time earlier to get a very detailed outline of each episode. I was hesitant to commit to clear trajectories, which meant the planning phase of the project was a longer process than it should've been.

Through this process, I primarily learned about how to construct a long-form, entertaining narrative out of an incredibly complex topic. *Under the Pagan Megalith* consisted of me synthesizing an amount of information and "threads" that I had for a project. The process of narrowing down the project and re-adjusting when new information arose informed me a lot about what kind of diligence goes into a long-form piece of reporting like this, as well as when to make changes and challenge your own understanding.

Further Research

Despite the ground covered in *Under the Pagan Megalith*, the conclusions reached in Episode 4 opened more questions than answers. The podcast sits within an ongoing conversation about politics' role in music, a discussion that has only intensified in the last decade. The position of Black Metal, and Rock as a whole, being "counter-culture," begs the question of "is the pure idea of counterculture inherently political," and "is un-political rock music flawed by design, or just a difference of preference." Additionally, the relationship between Black Metal and academia seems somewhat tenuous. While Oslo's Inferno Music Conference is a massive step in the right direction, there needs to be changes both within academia and Black Metal if a progressive, serious dialogue is to happen (Jóhannesson et al, 2025). There is serious doubt this could ever be achieved due to the inherently insular nature of Black Metal, but a deeper understanding of the

methodology and rationale of Black Metal will allow for less gawking at its absurdity and more understanding of the art it is. On the other hand, there does need to be a real effort on the part of academics to give Black Metal the “benefit of the doubt” and to put aside preconceived notions and attempt to understand Black Metal on a deeper level.

Within the space of Black Metal, more research can be done on the appropriation of Black Metal aesthetics and culture within general pop culture. The appropriation of Black Metal could then be contrasted with other alternative music genres, such as Punk and Goth, to get a wider understanding of mainstream culture's views on alternativeness and the reasons behind them.

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Podcast Scripts

Episode 1: Emerging from the Void

In Norway, in the early 1980s, a group of young men sought to challenge the status quo. These men don't feel like they fit in, and there's a certain pride in that. Being on the outside, together, creating art that masses found abhorrent and inaccessible. These men were fueled by their vitriol

towards the world they lived in, and sought to bring it too its knees. Some of these men would reach down to the devil, a Christian society's greatest fear. But some of these men reached back into their past to create musical brutality that would embody the “long forgotten strength” of a bygone era. A better, purer time. The era of the Vikings. But they didn’t meet the real Vikings, who represented a subsection of an incredibly diverse and rich society. They were welcomed with the blood-soaked arms of an imposter, tainted by inaccuracy, misinterpretation, and propagation, forged over centuries. Black Metal seized this imposter with glee. The farmers, traders, cooks, and craftsmen never mattered. The fantasy of the all-mighty barbarian was real, alive, and had unfinished business with the Christians who suppressed them. Imposter or not, Black Metal had found its brothers in arms, and it was time to go to war.

This is Under The Pagan Megalith

Hello, and welcome to Under The Pagan Megalith, a deep dive into how Black Metal interprets Norwegian and “Viking” history, mythology, and culture, and how those interpretations have shaped the Black Metal scene. I’m your host, Nicholas Kobe, and join me for this voyage through one of music’s most extreme genres and one of history’s most misunderstood peoples.

Before we start, a few disclaimers. First, viewers should note that all episodes of Under the Pagan Megalith will discuss themes of racism and violence. Second, this podcast is an attempt at a scholarly discussion of Black Metal’s interpretation of Viking history. While many sources will be referenced directly within the episodes, a full list of sources can be found in the description below.

Furthermore, this site will use the term “Viking” as a broad term to encompass the people to whom these songs refer and “Viking Culture” as the Scandinavian Society during the Viking Age (800-1050). While it is well known that these terms are inaccurate, this site will use them as shorthand, as it’s what’s most commonly known to the public. Furthermore, the true history of the Vikings will be expanded on in Episode 2, where this topic will be given more time to breathe.

For this first episode, we will be laying some groundwork, primarily with the history of Black Metal, and how it developed and the shape it took through its first and second waves.

Heavy Metal, as a genre, has in itself had a long-debated origin, be it the Beatles with “Helter Skelter” in 1968, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, or Black Sabbath’s self-titled debut in 1970. Wherever you see the start point, metal quickly catapulted into its own distinct genre, with the help of bands such as the aforementioned Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Motorhead, Iron Maiden, and more. Through the seventies, these bands, and more, gained steam, while the beginnings of the next, more intense wave of metal began to emerge. Metal in the early 80s began to be faster, louder, and darker with an increased focus on disturbing and occult lyrical themes and

blisteringly fast tempos, alongside non-melodic, screamed vocals, which also began to emerge, borrowing influence from hardcore punk.

All of this culminated in one of the most important bands in extreme metal, Venom. Founded in 1978, Venom is a band that pushed what it meant to be metal to its utmost extreme, unlike the pop tendencies of hair metal, which were gaining steam. Explaining this extreme intent in an interview with Louder, band leader Cronos said

“I loved Sabbath, but I realised that they’d only touched the tip of the iceberg. This could go so far. Ozzy was singing about being chased by the Devil. I thought: I’ll be the Devil!”

This intent was clearly stated with the band’s 1981 debut single “In League with Satan,” where Cronos screams about drinking the blood of children and wreaking havoc under the direct control of Satan.

Musically, the lineage is clear from heavier rock songs like Kiss’s “God of Thunder to Venom’s distinctly darker sound. In League With Satan would become the lead single off of Venom’s debut record titled *Welcome to Hell*, which was never intended to be the group’s debut LP, but rather a series of demos put together. Like its lead single, the album is the result of Venom's never ending to drive to push Metal to its limits. The album leans on deep, muscly grooves in a way that feels like a direct response to an album like Hellbent For Leather by Judas Priest. Additionally, the lyrics take the concept of Satanic evil further than any band up until this point.

Venom kept pushing full steam ahead, returning in 1982 with their sophomore album. While Welcome to Hell was much more inspired by classic metal, this LP was, first of all, actually recorded with the intention of being an album, and leaned into a more viscous, chaotic sound. The vocals were less melodic, the guitars were less coherent, and Venom thrived in the chaos. This album would go on to be cited as an early influence in many of extreme metal's most important sub-genres such as thrash and death metal. In pushing metal to its extremes, Kronos wanted Venom’s music to have a title of its own, to separate it from other, lighter bands, and emphasize Venom's true satanic darkness. The term would become the title of the album, plastered on either side of Satan's head in white regal text: Black Metal

This pushing of metal by Venom and their peers resulted in the creation of some of metal’s most important sub-genres, which all influenced each other. Thrash metal, the genre that would eventually spawn Metallica, saw a lot of success in the early '80s, and as bands progressively went faster and more chaotic, bands like Sodom, Kreator, and Slayer pushed thrash’s most abrasive elements to a tipping point. In the meantime, bands like Mercyful Fate were increasing metal’s extreme theatrics, both aesthetically in satanic imagery and lyrics, and musically, with King Diamond’s signature blend of wailing and growling on their 1983 debut, *Mellisa*.

For this story, we're going to follow Venom's influence to Sweden, where a year following *Black Metal*, a new band would be jump-started, who'd push the name "Black Metal" into a sonic direction more recognisable by a modern audience, forming the blueprint for modern Black Metal. Their name was Bathory.

The overtly Satanic themes and blistering pace of Venom were still present, but you probably noticed that there was a low-fi, rough sound to Bathory. In a way, this lack of decent production bolsters Black Metal. Not only is the music abrasive by its composition, but also in its physical recording. Another key note of Bathory's influence is the snarling vocals of Thomas Burr Yeh Forsberg, who removes any sense of melody from Venom to create a nasally ramble that succeeds at conveying pure evil. Bathory will follow this record up just one year later with *The Return…*

This album would continue off the blueprint of their debut, drawing even more influence from Venom, as the band's riffs take a more straightforward approach this time around. This is all of course, comparative, as *The Return* leans even further into the writhing vocals and dark themes. This progression would continue through Bathory's next two albums. 1987's *Under the Sign of the Black Mark* is a culmination of this era of Bathory, and arguably of the first wave of Black Metal, before new lyrical topics began to intrigue the band.

But before Bathory changed gears, they were being flanked by another extreme metal band that'd have a major influence on Black Metal culture, Celtic Frost.

Formed out of the ashes of the band Hellhammer, Celtic Frost leaned into the punk-inspired sounds of thrash metal to take aggression to the next level. Comparable to bands such as Slayer, who released their debut around the same time, Celtic Frost came out of the gate with a fitting ferocity.

This sound would only hone itself on their second and third albums, *To Mega Therion* and *Into the Pandemoniu,* as the band incorporated more high-concept storytelling. While not as overtly Satanic as Mercyful Fate or Venom, Celtic Frost's use of fantastical storytelling can be seen in the sagas spun by later Black Metal bands.

At this point in the timeline, Black Metal may not seem incredibly divorced from other subgenres such as death and thrash metal. As a matter of fact, many American pioneers in those subgenres, such as Possessed, Slayer, and Metallica, would cite bands such as Venom or Celtic Frost as big influences. By the mid to late 80s, those subgenres were taking their now familiar identity. 1985 saw the release of Possessed's *Seven Churches*, the arguable origin point for Death Metal. This would be followed in 1987 by the debut of Death, with *Scream Bloody Gore*, the start of the most acclaimed band in Death Metal's history, while bands like Morbid Angel and Obituary followed closely behind. Thrash arguably peaked around this era. 1986 saw the release

of Slayer's *Reign In Blood*, Metallica's *Master of Puppets*, and Megadeth's *Peace Sells..But Who's Buying* and Kreator's *Pleasure to Kill* are all albums that still remain among the most acclaimed heavy metal releases of all time.

Meanwhile, in Europe, Black Metal's development was taking another important step, again at the hands of Bathory. In 1988, the band released their fourth studio album, *Blood Fire Death*. From the moment the album starts, its long, acoustic intro takes the listener off guard. It lulls them into a sense of security, unusual for a Black Metal album. However, as the intro passes and the second song, "A Fine Day To Die," kicks in, the lyrics shrieked by KWOR-thon are unlike anything we've heard before. Singing of swords, ships, and battles, Bathory leans fully into Viking lore on *Blood Fire Death*, setting an important lyrical blueprint for the rest of Black Metal to follow.

-A Fine Day To Die-

Bathory's commitment to Viking imagery goes beyond a few lyrical mentions. The band chose to use a painting entitled "The Wild Hunt of Odin" by Peter Nicolai for their album cover. The painting, created in 1872, is a dramatic piece inspired by fellow romantic poets of the time. In an interview, Bathory leader KWOR THON addressed the shift to mythological lyrics, citing influence from opera and classical artists like Beethoven, Wagner, and Haydn, stating

"Around 1986, I realised we were actually just writing albums full of religious hocus-pocus, satanic rubbish and demonic crap. I was not a Satanist and knew absolutely nothing about occultism or demonic affairs, so I asked myself why I should really be writing about that shit. I mean, we actually got to make albums, so why not try something different? That's when the idea to bring the whole pre-Christian Swedish Viking era into Bathory came about. Not that I knew any more about that period in time, but it was at least a fresh source to draw stories from."

This Viking-centric approach would only intensify with the band's fifth album, *Hammerheart*. The band's lyrics now exclusively focus on Norse culture, using references to gods such as Thor and Odin to frame stories around raiding and battles.

Bathory's fresh take would become incredibly influential throughout Scandinavian metal bands. Above all, Bathory and bands like Venom and Celtic Frost represented a deep urge to take metal to its most extreme. To bring in influences from all abrasive genres of music to create a sound so harsh that it could musically convey true evil.

As the 90s rolled around, in Norway, some young musicians were getting inspired by this rebellious ethos. Building off the foundations of their predecessors, the second wave of Black Metal would push the genre to its peak of infamy, bringing real-life death and destruction into what was already some of the most evil music around.

Unbeknownst, except to the local scene, in 1984, a year after the formation of Bathory, the band Mayhem would form in Oslo, Norway. Like a lot of Black Metal bands of this era, the group formed long before any officially released music would be recorded, but Mayhem's influence can be clearly felt, pushing the seams of Black Metal with their *Pure Fucking Armageddon* demo. On their 1987 EP *Deathcrush*, the band is already a more terrifying, abrasive band than anything we've seen so far. To Mayhem, anything extreme was good, from the lyrics, instrumentation and the frankly awful production. *Deathcrush* takes the roots of what was established by Venom and Bathory and makes it somehow more gruesome and gritty. Journalists who were invited to hear
Mayhem rehearse before the release of their demo attested to the fact that what these kids from Norway were doing was unlike anything they'd ever heard. Just compare Venom's "Witching Hour" to Mayhem's rendition on this EP.

Following the release of this EP, Mayhem would go on to recruit drummer "Hellhammer" and vocalist "Dead". According to a friend of the band, and eventually bass player Varg Vikernes, "Until Hellhammer and Dead joined the band in 1989, Mayhem was a shitty, 'fun', hobby-band. If you read the lyrics on their Deathcrush album, you'll know what I mean."

Frontman Dead is frequently cited as being one of Black Metal's most influential figures. Featuring on only two Mayhem tracks, Dead gained his influence less through music, but through his intense commitment to Black Metal as a lifestyle. Dead allegedly sent a crucified rat along with his request to join the band. He began wearing "corpse paint," and while he may not have invented the look, he popularized its modern meaning. The name comes from the function of the makeup, to look like a corpse, rather than being cool like Kiss. Dead self mutilated at shows, and was said to have often buried his clothes the night before a show, before digging them up, to make his, well, dead look even more convincing.

In 1991, Dead took his own life, slashing his wrists and throat before shooting himself with a shotgun. At the time, he was living with fellow Mayhem members Euronymous and Hellhammer, the former of whom found his body. Euronymous had allegedly encouraged Dead's self-destructive behavior, as he believed in enhancing the darkness of Mayhem. After discovering the body, Euronymous made his way to a store, bought a disposable camera, and took pictures of Dead's body, including rearranging the remains to some extent. After he had finished, he finally called the authorities.

Dead's suicide, and the reaction by Euronymous and some other members of the Black Metal scene, is indicative of just how far Black Metal musicians were willing to go. Following this point, it only got more dramatic.

On June 6th, 1992, the PHAN TOFF church was burned to ashes. Standing since the 12th century, the beautiful wooden church, of the iconic “stave” style, was devastated. No one was ever officially found guilty of the arson; however, the prime suspect, Varg Vikernes, used the image of the charred building as the cover to his Black Metal project Burzum’s debut EP *Aske*.

Whether Vikernes is responsible for the church’s destruction is mostly irrelevant. Because what is undeniable is that the burning of the Fantof church would inspire a slew of church burnings, with suspected links to the Black Metal scene, for the next few years.

Fantof burned in June. By the end of the year, there were 13 fires total, only 10 of which were “solved” as reported by Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*. The article goes on to report 10 in ‘93, 14 in ‘94, and 7 in ‘95 as of the article’s publication on November 7th of that year. While authorities were not able to link Varg Vikernes definitively to the arson of Fantof, he was arrested for burning three separate churches in 1992.

Vikernes was not alone in these crimes and was joined by other members of the Norwegian Black Metal scene. For the HOLE MEN KOLNE Chapel arson, Varg was joined by BAWRD EYE THUN AKA “Fraust”, drummer of Emperor. Fellow Emperor member, guitarist TOO-mas TOR-mods-ed-ter HOW-gen AKA “Samoth,” served 16 months in prison for his involvement with Varg in the Skjold Church. For the burning of the aw-sa-nay Church, Varg was joined by Yarn Ing-uh TUNS-bairg from Hades Almighty.

So why? Was it all a publicity stunt? Young people acting out? Service to a demonic deity? In some ways, all of these are true. In his article “Pagan Terror,” Meer-oh-shlaf Ver-Zal of MaSaaRuhk University argues that these church burnings were all a form of terrorism. Not only were these burnings meant to shock and awe the general public (in which they did), but they were also meant as a statement of overt rebellion to Norwegian Christianity.

Metal has a long history of anti-Christian sentiments and anti-religious sentiment overall. What makes the second wave of Black Metal different is that there was a deeper purpose, according to Varg, who was interviewed from jail in 1995.

“Well, it for sure is no “satanic" acts as the newspapers want it to be, it is Heathen acts exclusively. I support church burning and grave desecration because it causes a psychological effect on the people. "Show Odinn to the people, and Odinn will be lit in its soul. It is dry wood and twigs to the Odinnic fire!

“I am a Norwegian with Norwegian beliefs, as simple as that. Read some history about the time before Norway was Christianized, and you will know my beliefs. A Norseman would be the correct thing to call me. Nothing more, nor less.”

A similar statement can be heard from Samoth of Emperor, who, when interviewed from jail, after burning the Skjold Church, said, “We all hung out and talked about our hatred for Christianity and how to get the Viking religion back.” A 1994 interview for the documentary *Det Svate Alvor* with Garm of Ulver also mirrors this saying, “We have to remember that Christianity was forced on the people of Norway, and as the sons of Odin, we see it as our duty to take back what was once ours.”

Jorn Inge Tunsberg reflected on the rationale behind the church burnings he helped commit while being interviewed for *Black Metal: Evolution of the Kult*. Though he admits that there would’ve been more effective forms of protest, he explains their previous thought process as “Back then, those actions were a fist in the face of Christianity.”

While there was some dissent, including from Manheim, former drummer of Mayhem, these disagreements seem to be more along the lines of method, rather than philosophy. It’s clear that a large portion of the artists in the Norwegian Black Metal scene were looking to, at least in some part, use their music to strike back against Christianity. While some of the social dynamics around the early Norwegian Black Metal scene could’ve led to some members going along with violent acts. It could be partially a deadly combination of wanting to impress peers, and general adolescent recklessness. It’s clear that to many of the most influential figures, these burnings were all part of a larger Black Metal philosophy, unquestionably tied to pushing Norway back to its so-called glorious roots in the time of the Vikings.

We will take a historical look at that “glorious time” on the next episode of Under the Pagan Megalith while also seeing how the perception of the Viking has evolved and been warped by various cultures, each with its own agenda.

Episode 2: True History and Trve Kvlt

On a small island off the coast of England, sat a monastery. Lindesvarne. Built in 634, the monastery was part of a growing Christian presence in Northern Europe, Britain, and Ireland. On June 8, 793, a fleet of ships arrived on their shores. Longships, not as well known or feared at the time. These boats would be key in the years to come, a new age in which the sacred ground at Lindesfarne would be the catalyst. Emerging from their ships were Vikings, Scandinavian men, well armed and motivated, who massacred the monks on Lindesvarne.

“Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold, the church of St. Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God.”

Similar accounts would appear all over Europe through what became known as the “Viking Age”. Pretty vicious, straightforward, and to some, with certain sensibilities, metal. But like everything in life, things aren’t that simple. Who really were the Vikings? And more importantly,

how has our perception of the Vikings deviated from the historical reality in the 1200 years since that day at Lindesvarne?

I'm Nicholas Kobe, and this is Under The Pagan Megalith, A show about how Black Metal interprets Norwegian and "Viking" history, mythology, and culture. This is Episode 2 of this series. If you have not seen Episode 1, I'd recommend you check that out, as it establishes the background history of Black Metal that will converge with the Vikings a little later in the narrative.

Viewers should also be warned that discussions of violence, racism, and fascism are to follow. As always, sources for my research can be found in the description below.

To truly understand the Vikings and how they are perceived, we must take a large step back to understand the motivations for our sources. Not only why the people who wrote about the Vikings wrote the way they did, but why the Vikings seemingly did what they did.

The first part is pretty simple. Considering a lack of text-based evidence from the Vikings themselves on their actual raiding and the philosophy behind it, we are mostly left with Christian sources, who are on the outside looking in, or, in this case, on the other end of sharp spears. Therefore, a lot of the accounts that we get about Viking raids are extremely violent. That's not to say that it's invalid for survivors to be a little biased after their entire livelihood was destroyed, but we are relying on rather biased sources for our firsthand accounts.

The first common misconception to dispel is that "Vikings" are a "race" or even a "culture". Yes, I have been referring to "Viking culture" for all of this episode, and will continue to do so. However, in our case, I am using the term to describe what is perceived as Viking values, ie, the culture adopted by modern people attempting to imitate the Vikings. The truth is, "Vikings" as we know them were part of larger societies, all driven by different factors.

Scandinavian culture was not unified at the time of Lindesvarne. While Harald Finehair would unify Norway and claim sovereignty over the region in the late 8th century, plenty of other Scandinavians, such as the Danes, were fully independent cultures, who also participated in raids. Of course, any culture is bigger than just its military, and the Scandinavians were no different.

Because of some of the sources we have about raids, general exotism, and other factors we'll address later, Scandinavians are painted as a one-note, all-warrior race. The truth is, their amount of piracy and conquest is, in some ways, less bloody than the conquests of the Mediterranean by Alexander the Great, and later, the Romans.

Some Scandinavians raided because they were driven to find more land, others sought glory and fame, and others wanted to escape political threats, as localized fighting was common.

For these raiders, a lot of the answers could be found in monasteries, which hold some of the Christian world's greatest treasures and were occupied by religious men and women who are under oath not to take up arms. Therefore, a hit-and-run approach on these monasteries was effective, and Vikings brought back many treasures and slaves, which just reinforced the idea that there were good things to be found in mainland Europe.

Importantly, however, Vikings and Scandinavians as a whole were not all smash and grab. Scandinavian migrants participated in meaningful cultural exchange across Europe and North Africa. On a basic level, you can avoid the bloodshed and effort of raiding by simply trading with your neighbors, something that became extremely common. Evidence shows that the Vikings adopted material culture from the Franks as early as the 11th century. Across Europe and Asia, Scandinavians were seen assimilating, such as in the Byzantine Empire, where Scandinavian warriors were selected to create the Varangian Guard, or the personal bodyguard corps of the emperor. Scandinavian settlers seemed to prioritize farming and building families once they had established territory in their new land.

One of the most famous examples of Viking assimilation is King Rollo, who was given territory by the king of the Franks in exchange for his conversion to Christianity and marrying his daughter. For Rollo, the exchange gave him a new kingdom, which became Normandy. For the Franks, it allowed Rollo to serve as a northern buffer zone between their kingdom and Rollo's fellow ambitious Scandinavians.

This is one of a few examples where Scandinavians were able to gain significant territory in Europe. The other being the army of Gurtrum, who descended upon the British Isles. After an uneasy peace, the invaders were given the "Danelaw", a large chunk of northern and eastern England, in exchange for fealty to the crown.

This, however, was short-lived, as the Anglo-Saxons were able to defeat the Danes in 1066 at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, an event that, to most historians, marks the end of the Viking age. However, ironically enough, the Anglo-Saxons were soon ousted from England. William the Conqueror, King of Normandy and a descendant of the Viking Rollo, took control of the crown at the Battle of Hastings later that year.

Thus ends the "Viking Age." Seafaring raiders started to disappear, at least to the extent that piracy ever can. The Scandinavians, however, did not go away. And many of those who traveled to mainland Europe or England simply assimilated with the rest of medieval society, intermarrying with local peoples, and contributing to the shaping of the Europe we know today.

While there's plenty of the pop culture Viking that we can see in the historical truth of Vikings, they are much more nuanced than one may initially assume. Dr. Eleanor Barraclough of Bath Spa University called Viking-age Scandinavians "masters of cultural adaptation and integration" and points out how their cultural fusion in places across Europe, Asia, and even North America proves that there's more to the "Vikings" than just oppressive violence.

So if the history doesn't support this one-note interpretation of the Vikings, well, how do we get to the pop culture version that's more familiar today? We've already established why some of the Christian written sources may be partial to the violence and destruction of the Vikings, but to add on to that, we have to jump ahead in time to the Romantic period.

Wagner's operas are where a lot of the pop culture idea of a "Viking" comes from, up to and including the horned helmets. Wagner was a German, and his operas often attempted to create some sort of German national identity. By the time of Wagner, there were already key parts of the German national identity in place, such as Prodistantisim, but Wagner stressed the need for Germans to unify. *Viking Heritage Magazine*'s Johni Langer claims that changes made to the Norse Mythology were made, in part at least, to differentiate them from the Greco-Roman pantheon, who were the usual visual stand-ins for "old pagan gods." Langer's article argues that Wagner's focus on national unity superseded his interest in portraying "real" history, but as resources weren't as readily available for fact-checking, the depiction stuck, only to be reinforced in a much darker context.

Now you'll notice that I've been referring to the Germans all of a sudden, a group that we haven't been talking about up until this point, either in terms of Black Metal or Viking History. So why is Norse culture and mythology so important to the Germans?

Well, in order to understand that, we have to go back to some of the foundations of "Germanic Culture," even pre-Wagner.

The concept of "national identity," or at least wanting to connect your civilization with a legendary past, isn't anything new. However, it was taking center stage during the Renaissance. At this time, art and culture from Classical Greece and Rome were being rediscovered and emphasized as the foundations for new learning and discovery. The epicenter of this was Italy, and by leaning on its mythic Roman past, while wrapping it in the power of the modern Catholic Church, the Italian peninsula was able to flex not only that it is currently the center of the world, but it has been during Europe's most glorious period.

As Renaissance humanism moved north, the Holy Roman Empire was looking to "legitimize" itself with a connection to the Classical Era and develop its new national identity. The solution is the writings of the Roman general Tacitus, who wrote *Germania*, recounting his knowledge of the Germanic Tribes.

Tacitus's point with the pamphlet is to show the "soft" Romans what the Germans, a race of strong, warlike men, were doing as an example of what they "should be" through peak masculinity.

"If a State lies long rusting in peace and inactivity, off go most of the noble youths belonging to it, of their own accord, to join other nations where a war of some sort is going on because peace is repulsive to the race, and the path to glory lies through danger…"

Germans used this document to forge a national identity as battle-hardened and gritty people, who historically took down the great Roman Empire. Tacitus also adds to the good qualities of the Germans, saying.

"For no one there makes a jest of vice, or says that seducing and being seduced is the style of the period."

Tacitus makes special note about the "Germans" racial identity, saying, "For myself, I am disposed to side with those who hold that the German peoples have never intermarried with alien stocks, but have always stood forth as a race rooted in the soil, pure and unlike every other."

He claims this is the case, as Germany to him is so inaccessible that reaching it, either via boat or land, would be incredibly difficult for outsiders, and no one would want to migrate there if they were already in southern Europe or Africa. However, Tacitus does list dozens of unique tribes in the region, and considering he likely never set foot in Germany, these descriptions are not entirely trustworthy.

According to *A Most Dangerous Book* by Christopher B Krebs, the discovery of *Germania* was a golden opportunity for Renaissance Germans to concoct a national origin. As you may have noticed, there are quite a few details of the Germans that tie into the modern, pop culture version of the Vikings. The war-like nature and the strong sense of justice are here and accounted for. While Tacitus' tone is more positive than the sources on Vikings, some of the takeaways from past readers have clearly been the same, as both would serve as a source of inspiration to countless individuals later down the road.

Additionally, it can be argued that the love of Paganism is a product of the world becoming more secular. Kennet Granholm argues this leads to people thinking that "nature is alive, divine and valuable in itself, not simply animated by the influence of God". This led to an urge to reconnect with a more "organic" or "natural" religion, such as Paganism

Coupled with the rise of Nationalism, the popularity of Paganism as an "original" religion to Scandinavians took root. A similar phenomenon, based around a "folk-spirit" or a Volkggeist,

emerged in Germany. This later developed into the Volkisch movement, which added an element of impending doom, as the Volkisch movement believed the “ethnic uniqueness of the German folk” was under attack by outside influence.

This connection between these two northern regions was later established, not only via artists like Wagner’s connections of Norse mythology with German nationalism, but through earlier “race science.”

In the 1830s and 40s, Scandinavian scientists began to theorize that different “races” migrated to Europe at varying times in prehistory, evolving into the European races of today. This theory was based on early connections between Sanskrit and European languages.

One of the most notable examples of this is Arthur de Gobineau. As one of the founders of early racial science argued, Norwegians and Germans were the peak of racial purity and were devalued by intermarrying with other people. His 1853 book *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* became one of the most influential texts in justifying racism in a biological sense.

Later, Ander RET-see-US developed the idea of the “cephalic index”, which attempts to connect skull breadth to mental capacity (Hockman 2014). He separated people into two main groups, “dolly-co-se-phalic” (long-skulled) and “bracky-co-se-phalic” (short-skulled), arguing that dollyco-se-phalic people are inherently superior. He argued that the native Europeans, the Sami, and later, the Basques, were bracky-co-se-phalic and therefore destined to be conquered by the dollyco-se-phalic Indo-Europeans, who would found “Western Civilization.

Rudolf Keyser translates the idea into a Scandinavian context by applying this concept to the Goths and Norwegians. He also adds that patriarchal-based households are a core tenet of Norwegian society.
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Peter Munch makes a similar argument, claiming the existence of four human races, the “best” of which is the Iranians (later morphed into “Aryan”), who became strong via their long migration to Europe and the conquering of the Sami people.

After a brief pause, this racial “science” returned to popularity in the 1890s. During this time, Norwegian taxonomists found a common “long-skulled” Germanic group, which was later dubbed “Vikingstypen”.

Carl Arbo agreed that the long skull, blond hair, and blue eyes were the characteristics of the true Germanic race, and said “pure” race had been muddied by “race mixing” over time, even though this contrasts withTacitus’ description of red-haired Germans. He also argues that rather than migrants, the European people were indigenous to Northern Germany and responsible for all of European history.

Andreas Hamsen added that “long-skulled” people were naturally inclined to love freedom. While “short-skulled” people also craved equal rights, they were not capable or worthy of receiving them.

We’re so far off the beaten path from where we’ve started, and frankly, that’s kinda the point. As we’ve discussed, only fractions of the historical reality matter when it comes to the Vikings, their interpretations, and how narratives are pushed using them; accuracy isn’t as key as message. Especially as more people have taken “research” into their own hands, with varying degrees of care.

Barbora Žiačková argues that access to primary sources, archaeology in museums, and the internet has allowed for a democratization of historical knowledge. This allows for groups of people to interpret history however they want, via reading or interpreting artifacts and becoming “experts” without any formal training to understand the wider context and historical analysis skills. This allows for a narrative to be formed based on this interpretation. As the “academic elite” attempts to push scholarship that conflicts with this information, based on new discoveries, they’re shunned and discredited as being “wrong” based on laypeople's thinking that they have superior knowledge based on “facts” that have been proven incorrect as we learn more.

Additionally, the perspective of archeology allows for symbols to be created. This has led to people feeling deeply connected to artifacts as part of their heritage. This can elicit the emotional connection that can be triggered by challenges to one’s personal identity. Historically, archeology and history have commonly pushed narratives. This is mainly because they need to appeal to some sort of donor, which is historically the government. This has led to archeology and history being funded just to promote nationalistic or other propagandist purposes, further supporting a possibly untrue narrative. Therefore, historians and archaeologists have a hard time convincing the public to “change their mind, as they can be seen as 'working for an agenda' by skeptics.

All of this is key in talking about the interpretation of Vikings. Considering how important a symbol the Vikings represent to some Scandinavians and how heavily they’ve been mythologized, any attempt at a correction of the narrative is met with controversy and pushback. This can serve as a further example of how the pop culture viking, and other historical groups, have remained “inaccurate”, as rocking the boat will disrupt the “core” enthusiasts of the media are chasing and emotionally attached to, even if it’s wrong.

As we can see, the development, both culturally and “scientifically” (and I use that term loosely), is quickly descending down a slippery slope. One of the believers of this Aryan race will use ideology, among other things, to justify a war that would kill over 55 million people. Join us next episode, as we explore “Viking” culture’s role during the Third Reich, and in its wake, and how

Black Metal artists across the genre's history have taken parts of the “Viking” both real and mythologized, and run with it.

Under The Pagan Megalith: Episode 3: Ein Volk

"I support all dictatorships. Stalin, Hitler, Ceaușescu... and I will become the dictator of Scandinavia myself. I'm a Viking, and we're supposed to fight. Make war, not love... right? A tiny bit of the Viking spirit lives on, and I'm part of it. I hate peace and love. Fucking stupid people walking around and loving each other. We're supposed to make war."- Burzum

“Your culture is worthless. It will therefore be eradicated. We don’t care about other people. We will find the eternal riche”- Totenwache

“One (Aryan) blood flows in our veins, unalienated and pure. Our friendship, our brotherhood shall endure forever. The Allfather watches and rules over us all in Asgard. If we find death in battle, the Valkyries carry us to Valhalla!”- Absurd (Germania above all)

“Black Metal should not be connected with the social side of National Socialism as it is related to the masses, but the elitist philosophy behind National Socialism fits perfectly into Black Metal. I’m tired of this polemic.”- Infernal War Interview

“HAIL THE NORSEMEN, FUCK THE REST!!!”- Burzum

End of this clip, ending with Ein Volk

Hello, and welcome to Under The Pagan Megalith, a deep dive into how Black Metal interprets Norwegian and “Viking” history, mythology, and culture, and how those interpretations have shaped the Black Metal scene. I’m your host, Nicholas Kobe, and join me for this voyage of one of music’s most extreme genres and one of history’s most misunderstood peoples.

Before we start, a few disclaimers. First, viewers should note that all episodes of Under the Pagan Megalith will discuss themes of racism and violence, especially in this episode. Second, this podcast aims to engage in a scholarly discussion of Black Metal’s interpretation of Viking history. While many sources will be referenced directly within the episodes, a full list of sources can be found in the description below.

Last episode, we discussed the historical truth of the Vikings, and more importantly, how they’ve been interpreted, not only in their homeland of Scandinavia, but in Germany, which had grown through works such as Richard Wagner’s operas to feel a deep kinship with Viking culture. In the wake of the scientific revolution, a lot of early science had begun to develop around race. Considering the growth of nationalism, also present at the time, this resulted in what are, by today’s standards, some pretty horrific studies.

After World War I, this branch of science resurfaced in Germany, becoming integral to the rising Nazi party. As stated last episode, some of this was already baked into German nationalism; Hitler and the Nazis took it to the next level.

Nazi love of Norse mythology connects to the Volkisch movement, a pride in national history, alongside "creative energy and a sense of individuality". Guido von List and Jorg Lanz von Liebenfels were the first to make this serve political/nationalistic means. This led to the glorification of historical people as "heroic Aryan God men", the blonde-haired, blue-eyed "noble savage" archetype that's been developing for the Vikings over the last few centuries. These ideas were adopted by the Thule Society and then by a group called Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, which later became the Nazi Party.

Aidan Neher, of Charleton College, argues that the Nazis attempted to create their own "neopagan religion of the blood" to unite the Aryan race. One of the most blatant examples of Nazi appropriation of Scandinavian culture is the SS. The SS, as depicted by the Nazis, was taken from a proto-Germanic, Sól, symbol for the letter "s" or "sun". This pre-Viking design was then appropriated by Guido Von List in 1902 for his "Armanen Runes", a made-up set of ahistorical runes, used by neopagans. Again, meaning "S", the Nazis displayed two together to represent their Schutzstaffel, the elite paramilitary responsible for Nazi activity in Germany's everexpanding territory, and carrying out the Holocaust.

Nazis also heavily used "shared history" as a recruitment tactic after invading Denmark and Norway in early 1940 as part of Operation Weserübung. Posters were displayed featuring Vikingstyle warriors aboard longships wearing SS helmets or Nazi soldiers with Vikings standing behind them. They also stressed the "right" of the Aryans (ie, Germans and Scandinavians) to conquer the rest of the world.

As can be clearly seen, the Nazi Viking ignores the plurality of historical Vikings to hone in on only the stereotypes that serve their fascist agenda. While this is ahistorical, it's not a dramatic leap from the way Viking interpretation has progressed in Germany since the Romantic era.

Following the Nazi's defeat, Europe, especially Germany, was eager to move away from fascism. Vikings continued to be used as a pop culture symbol. Kirk Douglas starred in *The Vikings* in 1958, while the National Football League's Minnesota Vikings formed two years later in 1960. Aside from the pop culture saturation, the 20th century, pre and post-Nazis saw the beginnings of modern heathenism, and some of the neo-pagan groups that remain active to this day, and many of the groups that would influence Norwegian Black Metal.

To talk about the specific revivalist religions, we must briefly rewind the clock to the beginning of the 20th century. According to Egil Asprem in the journal *Pomegranate,* in the early 20th

century, and drawing from the Volkisch movement, Alexander Rud Mills became the first figurehead of a new paganist movement called Odinism. Mills depicts Odinism as "a cosmic battle" between the Pagan and Judeo-Christian religions. While there are some religious components, it seems this was primarily a means to push a fascist agenda. See, Mills thought that Christianity was not “native” to Northern Europe and, therefore, needed to be rejected to uphold the purity of the race. The movement was then exported to the United States via Else Christen in the 1960s, who founded the Odin Fellowship (Asprem 2008). She also promoted White Supremacy and "warrior ethics" associated with Vikings at the time, the social Darwinist idea that might makes right, and using the Vikings as “proof” of said concept. She also adds that the Norse Gods are "genetic archetypes for Scandinavian people" (Asprem 2008). This not only adds to the racial purity argument but also allows for the inclusion of United States citizens of Scandinavian descent, who can claim the same genetic lineage, even if they’re not in the geographic “homeland”.

In the 1970s, more organizations popped up that focused more on the religious aspect of Heathenism and are largely apolitical, under the umbrella of "Asatru"; however, some more politically-minded Heathen groups also identify under this label. In Norway, the concept of revivalist heathenism goes back to the 30s, which included some fascist members. However, as Hitler became more imperialist towards other European countries, Norwegians, even those who had supported the Nazis, stopped supporting the group.

After the war, most pro-Nazi sentiments were all but eliminated in Norway, only to return in the 1980s. Inspired by Western movements, primarily under the banner of Astrau and Bifrost. Most early Norwegian Asatru members entered from a place of interest in magic and history. Some members of Bifrost broke off in 1998, partially due to racial disagreements, associations with LeVeyan Satanism and other non-Norse occult practices, to form Foreningen Forn Sed.

As can be seen in this example and others, Norse paganism, as it existed around the time of the inception of Black Metal, can take a variety of forms across the political spectrum. However, the deep and pre-existing co-option of Norse paganism by fascists can make it easy for people to quickly transition from one to the other.

To address the interwovenness of Nazisim and Norse Paganism, groups typically took one of two options: to address it or not. Groups that refused to take a stance condemning nazisim obviously became the groups where those types of “heathens” flocked to. Some, such as Vigrid, even became outwardly pro-Nazi. On the other hand, groups such as Bifrost took a hard anti-Nazi stance, which has continued into modern groups such as Troth and Heathens Against Hate.

So now that our timeline has returned to around the 1980s, we can finally begin to dissect how Black Metal plays with Viking culture as a comparison with our other examples, starting with their lyrics.

A brief caveat first, however, Black Metal is arguably best known for its shrill shrieking vocals, washed under layers of guitar and bass. The lyrics are sometimes, intentionally, unintelligible. Therefore, while I will play some brief clips of the songs we will be discussing. I will also be reading the lyrics aloud to ensure you get the full picture of what's being said in each song. Additionally, some tracks will have to be translated from their original language into English, so take that into note.

As discussed in episode one, Bathory is, for many, seen as the start of Viking Metal, so it seems appropriate to start with them. In their biggest hit, "A Fine Day To Die," the band discusses a group of warriors preparing to go to battle. While it's not explicitly stated that these are Vikings, the song describes similar characteristics to those seen in our post-romantic depictions of the Vikings.

The elder among the men looked deep into/ the fire and spoke loudly with pride/ Tomorrow is a fine day to die. Now the morning advances from the far east/ Now the sun breaks through dust clouds and haze/ Now a forest of spears appears on the hill/ And steel shines bright in the sun's first rays/ die die die

On the album's fifth track, "For all those who died," Bathory speaks of persecution at the hands of the Christians.

For all those who cried aloud/ But whose tears were never heard/ For questioning one almighty father/ Of a heavenly distant world/ Beloved thee who submit/ The holy writings assured/ The golden cross stained with innocent blood/ But stand yet a thousand heavenward

While the Satanist themes remain on this record (such as "The Gold Walls of Heaven"), this idea of persecution at the hands of Christians will become a vital point of Black Metal's interpretation of Norse Paganism. The impact of Bathory can be seen in bands such as Hades, whose guitarist YURN IN-guh TOONS-bair said, "The Interest hailed from our national history, but I guess it was Bathory who inspired me to use pagan terms in Hades' music….I guess the inspiration had been there for a long time; I was fascinated by myths, ancient regions, the Middle Ages, and so on, and enjoyed stories told through movies, books, and music.

In the same interview, Tunsberg claims to have done research into the culture, but still does not consider himself to be "religious." The band Helheim takes its name from Norse mythology, opting to use it as a subject matter because the Satanism popular at the time felt disingenuous. They also felt personally connected with the values perceived in Paganism. Vocalist Vuh - gahn - dr said, "It's not about being a missionary like other religions mostly are; it's about finding your internal values. That's very important to me."

Lyrically, similar ideas of mourning lost knowledge and culture can be seen in the song “Lost Wisdom” by Burzum from 1992.

“Denied by the blind church/ 'cause these are not the words of God/ the same God that burnt the knowing.”

Considering Burzum’s importance in not only Black Metal, but specifically their use of Vikings in their lyricism, this early depiction is a great touchstone in where this idea of the tragedy of Viking colonization has gone, and will go next. Speaking of which, another great example comes from another important early Viking metal band, Enslaved, and their 1993 debut EP.

Proud men with no fear/ Strokes from the sword crushed the skull of the christian/ A long time we ruled, kings of the north/ Many battles we won, at the shores of Midgard/ But, betrayed by our own brothers/ we were forced down on our knees/ Now when the wind once again is howling/ the thoughts finally goes towards home/ We shall rise in our glory. The white horde will for sure shiver/ We died like men/ Therefore, we never vanished/ Weak is the one the enemy loves/ Never betray your origin

Once again, Enslaved is focusing primarily on the violence of the Vikings and their eventual “betrayal” by their own brothers. The “betrayal” could be from kings such as Rollo, who made a deal to become king of Normandy in exchange for being baptized and entering the Christian world, or a more general betrayal, felt at the inability to beat the Christians. Framing Viking loss, for any reason, as a “betrayal” is worth nothing. The use of “betrayal” highlights a paradox in the way that Black Metal, and a lot of pop culture, understands the Vikings. The idea that “betrayal” is what beat the Vikings is a way to explain the end of the Viking age without insinuating that their combat prowess, or general methods, were in any way inferior to the Christians. This allows the Vikings to maintain their “superiority”, even in defeat, considering masculine power seems to be at the front of many of these interpretations of the Vikings; any sort of emasculation ruins the myth entirely.

The initial Black Metal interpretation of Vikings is balanced upon this contradiction. That Norse society is simultaneously this ultra-strong, powerful, flawless ideal that humanity should aspire to; while simultaneously being the victims of horrible violence, colonization, and oppression. These two things can’t exist to the extremes that Black Metal plays up both sides. This great society has to be ravaged and oppressed by the Christians, but in no way can the Christians come off as in any way dominant. Essentially, the Vikings are the all-powerful underdogs.

To go back to the music, we can see that just one year after Enslaved, in Mayhem’s legendary debut LP in 1994, this sense of loss of culture and reverence for a Viking past is baked into the bones of Black Metal. The song “Pagan Fears” is an ode to that.
“The bloody history from the past/ Deceased humans now forgotten/ An age of legends and fear/

A time now so distant/ Less numbered as they were their lives/ So primitive and pagan/ Superstitions were a part of the life/ So unprotected in the dark nights/ Pagan fears/ The past is alive/ The past is alive/ Woeful people with pale faces/ Staring obsessed at the moon/ Some memories will never go away/ And they will forever be here

The same theme continues, albeit less upfront, through the next two tracks, “From the Dark Past” and “Buried by Time and Dust,” stressing the importance of this concept. Considering *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* is one of the most famous albums in Black Metal history, the prominence of Viking themes, even on an album typically more concerned with Satan, undeniably had a huge impact on the scene.

The connection between Viking culture and Black Metal can be seen in more than just lyrics, as many early artists have said on record what Viking Culture means to them.

When asked about the shift from satanic lyrics to Vikings, Bathory’s Quorthon said, “The Viking stuff was just another way to get at Christianity…Fourteen years ago, Black Metal used to be something completely different. It was everything from satanic or whatever, the occult, the dark side of life (not necessarily the evil side of life). Witchcraft, or anything magical or whatever. Today it's a much narrower scene. People will get very bad feelings about Black Metal today. Because it's got such a very bad reputation. We slid from Black Metal onto whatever, you know, viking shit. Because it was just something, another way to get at Christianity. But also to talk about something, or write about something, that was before Christianity came around.”

Quothon’s idea of “getting at the Christians” exposes some of the “true nature” that some academics believe the Vikings serve in Black Metal. Just like Satan, Vikings are a way to combat the Christian establishment, and their pop culture depiction as macho, badass warriors leads to them being a great group for the anti-Christian Black Metal scene to project onto.

As a genre of music built a lot on hate, Black Metal often exists primarily in opposition to societal ideals, rather than in favor of any clear alternative. This can explain why Black Metal can shift from Vikings to Satan and anywhere in between. The primary objective is to tear down social structures, like organized religion; whatever means are most suited to that end, is what will be adopted.

Quothon also mentions the “bad reputation” of Black Metal, which is likely referring to incidents such as the Mayhem murders or church burnings. What’s ironic is that despite Bathory using Vikings as a shift away from the bad reputation, one of the architects of the burnings, Varg Varknies, latched on to Viking myth as a way to glorify those acts.
Q: Then, do these church burnings and grave desecrations have something to do with Odinism? What are you actually trying to achieve with these cool deeds?

Varg: First of all, I am not convicted of grave desecration. Secondly, I have never said that I have burned any churches; it is the court that says that - not me. Well, it for sure is no "satanic" acts as the newspapers want it to be, it is Heathen acts exclusively. I support church burning and grave desecration because it causes a psychological effect on the people. "Show Odinn to the people, and Odinn will be lit in its soul". It is dry wood and twigs to the Odinnic fire!

In this interview, Varg is showcasing the perceived importance of Vikings as not only a counter to Christianity, not only through music, but also through these acts of terror. As we've seen in his musical project, Burzum, Varg often sings about how returning to pagan culture is a way for Norwegians to reconnect with their roots. Inherently, there's nothing wrong with this. However, as Vargnies' rhetoric begins to shift more and more to ridding Norway of a "foreign" influence like Christianity, and protecting the sanctity of the Norwegian people, we start to slide down a slippery slope that should start to sound familiar.

While not all Black Metal artists who choose to incorporate Vikings go as far as Varg, I choose Varg as the prime example. This is because not only is Varg incredibly famous and influential, but I also chose him because he is well known as a full-blown Nazi.

As alluded to earlier, Varg's line of logic seems to follow in a similar way to how post-romantic Germans arrived at fascist conclusions from what became the Viking stereotypes.

"The reason I have been drawn to and occasionally have expressed support for "nazism" is mainly because many of the Norwegian (and German) "nazis" embraced our Pagan religion as our blood religion, and they rejected Judeo-Christianity as Jewish heresy - and they were the first to do so in a long, long time! I have also experienced that most of the people supporting me or what I stand for are so-called "nazis" - while almost everybody else has just condemned me and then boycotted me and everything I have done. What makes me different from the "nazis" is basically three things: unlike them, I am not socialistic (not even on a national level), I am not materialistic, and I believe in (the ancient Scandinavian!) democracy."

If we have a positive relationship to our homeland, to our blood, to our race, to our religion, and to our culture, we will not destroy any of this with modern "civilization" (id est capitalism, materialism, Judeo-Christianity, pollution, urbanization, race mixing, Americanization, socialism, globalization, et cetera). The "nazi ghost" has scared millions of Europeans from caring about their blood and homeland for sixty years now, and it is about time we banish this ghost and again start to think and care about the things that (whether we like it or not) are important to us.

In this passage, taken directly from Varg's website, we see his stress on the purity of the Norwegian race and the exiling of the Abrahamic religion.

What's more, Varg is just the most prominent example of what would become Black Metal's most infamous subgenre, NSBM. National Socialist Black Metal. Most NSBM bands tend to follow a similar line of reasoning to Varknies. While there are debates about if the "National Socialist" part of the description is too specific, as is argued in *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* by Dayal Patterson, for the purposes of this podcast, we're going to still use it, as it's the bestknown descriptor of this type of music. While NSBM has spread throughout the world, some of the Northern European bands maintain a similar use of Vikings as Varg does. Take, for example, Absurd's "Germanien Uber Allies".

(TRANSLATED FROM GERMAN)
In the divisions "Viking" and "Nordland" were united/ our ancestors unwavering for the realm against the enemy/ Their honor was called loyalty, Aryan blood flowed in their veins/ and their heroism shall guide us and ever strengthen our courage/ Greater Germany for eons, from the/ East to England/ from the Arctic, from the Arctic Ocean, to the southern edge of the Alps/ One united people, one faith in ancient heathen power/ and in the ravens to the hammer, in victory in every battle!

When discussing NSBM, one important caveat is that Black Metal is intentionally provocative. Most metal fans don't take the lyrics of the death metal classic "Hammer Smashed Face" by Cannibal Corpse as actions actually committed by the band, but rather as playing into some dark fantasy. The difference is, however, that singing about an ideology and worldview is slightly different from gore and violence. It's easier to write off the over-the-top violence, rather than a set of beliefs being straightforwardly sung about. Especially when we know some of these bands really *are* Nazis.

A similar pride in the race and martial focus can be seen as well with NSBM band Thor's Hammer, whose name is also a clear reference to Norse Mythology. Here is a sample from the first song off their first album of the same name, "Fidelity Shall Triumph."

Power of spirit and strength of arms/ Unblemished Honour and Aryan pride/ Unshaken faith in forefathers Gods/ Make us the strongest among the men/ We keep the ancient flame still burning/ the pagan past is our fame/ Soon we will crush the strange belief/ And then fidelity shall triumph!

Another well-known NSBM band, Graveland from Poland, has been active since 1991, right at the onset of the second wave of black metal. They have continued to be associated with NSBM for lyrics such as those to the 2001 track "Ancient Blood."

The days when ancient blood/ Will awake in the hearts of white men and women/Our banners will rise to the sky/ And will flap with joy on wind/ Ancient wisdom and strength will return/

Divided nation will become unity/ And cry of thousands of throats/ Will disperse darkness/ Clearing a way for Swarozyc light/ The gates to source of our might/ On rushing shining chariots/ Heroes of nation will return us our pride

Just to be clear, NSBM is a subgenre built on Nazism as its primary distinguishing feature. While many music listeners may think of the differentiation points of "genre" as primarily sonically based, not lyrical, many metal subgenres have formed that are built primarily on lyrical differentiation, rather than musical. NSBM is an example of this, as well.

Despite the influence of Varg and Scandinavian black metal, there are examples of NSBM bands, such as Grand Belial's Key, that convey similar Nazi messages without the use of Vikings.

Another non-Viking-centric NSBM band is Dur Strummer. One of the most blatantly Nazi bands we've heard so far, the band centers its heathenism as a core of their lyrical themes and Nazi beliefs. The difference is that Dur Strummer is from Greece and uses Ancient Greek Mythology and History to propel their Nazi agenda.

We don't believe in the Prince of Peace/ Hail the Gods of War!/ Zionists who now rule
Die by the Zeus' Thunder/ The Wargod Ares is on the loose/ Slaves of the jew upon the cross/ Religion of slaves, false equality/ We will throw away from our Lands/ The cursed Judeochristianity

W.A.R.!/ When the Duty Calls… W.A.R.!!. When the Blood Calls… W.A.R.!!

Burning churches, Aryan Might/ Our Heathen Army now Arise/ Racial Call and Spartan Might/ Arise Our Ancient Gods Arise!!!

Beyond the pipeline from Viking to Nazis that has been historically laid, Dayal Patterson argues that Satanism, particularly as written about in Anton LaVey's 1969 *Satanic Bible*, also could've contributed to the alt-right shift of some prominent figures in black metal, as LaVey's work deals heavily in concepts of Social Darwinism and destroying the weak–a clear mirror to both fascist thinking and the perception of the pop culture Viking.

Kampfar's Dolk makes the point that pride and exploration into heritage do not automatically make you a Nazi, saying, "I cannot disappear from the fact that I am Norwegian. If you talk like that in several countries and say, "I am Norwegian, and I am a pagan," then for them, you are a Nazi….I kind of put my finger up to all that and say "Yeah, I'm a pagan because I'm Norwegian and my roots are there, and my roots in cold, hard metal are also there.

In terms of its inception, NSBM has gained an incredible amount of infamy, arguably leading non-listeners to assume there's much more NSBM than there really is. On the other hand, many

Black Metal artists have been accused of being Nazi sympathizers for a variety of reasons, including use of iconography, lyrical content (including a lot of the “pipeline” we’ve covered here), and associations with NSBM artists. For obvious reasons, that’s not something most bands would admit to easily, even if you truly were a Nazi. Even if the true scope of NSBM is unknowable, it is almost certainly a very, very vocal and famous minority, out of the entirety of Black Metal

However, with all the history behind us, tying not only tracking the origins of Black Metal, but the history of the Vikings, both real and pop culture that inspired this music, where does that lead us? Does the fascist past of Viking interpretation permanently taint its use in Black Metal? Can Black Metal even exist without the Vikings? Can Black Metal adapt to 21st-century understanding of history, race, and religion, or is that against its very nature? We will address all of this and more in the final episode of Under The Pagan Megalith. See you then.

Under The Pagan Megalith Episode 4: Voyaging Out

(-closing of a book-)
(-taking a record off a turntable-)
(-sheathing of a sword-)
(-guitar static and turn it off-)

So what now?

We’ve made it to the modern day, but the specter of the past, for both Vikings and Black Metal, still looms large. On January 6th, 2021, the United States Capitol was stormed by insurrectionists, one of the most eyecatching of whom was wearing a horned headpiece. In 2020, the festival Darkness Guides Us was cancelled by its original venue due to backlash surrounding the festival's lineup, featuring bands accused of being Neo-Nazis. In November of 2025, Snorre W. Ruch, of Thorns, and Rune “General Gribbsphiiser” Røstad of Slagmaur staged a missing persons report for themselves to drum up publicity for a musical collaboration. Another example of Black Metal artists, now in the modern day, using controversy and crime to court attention, in a slightly less destructive manner than church burnings. Meanwhile, Amon Amarth has continued to soar in popularity, and artists such as Peyton Parrish have had viral hits signing on Miracle of Sounds’ “Valhalla Calling”, which shifts away from the brutal sounds of death and black metal, while keeping all the imagery and reference to longships, fjords, and ravens.

Vikings and Black Metal, both are clearly surviving with some of the similar themes we’ve been tracking for the last three episodes. However, interest in Scandinavian history and Black Metal has expanded, the exceptions to the “rule” are becoming evermore common. The plurality of the modern age is leading to interpretations of Vikings, or Viking-adjacent themes in Black Metal, in more ways than ever before. Plus, as bands such as Mayhem reach their 40th anniversaries,

there's been more than enough time for scholars, historians, and fans to start taking a serious look at Vikings and Black Metal, and building the research that this very podcast is built upon. The narrow river has led to the open sea. So join me, as we try to explore it, on Episode 4 of Under the Pagan Megalith, Voyaging Out

Intro

Hello, and welcome to Under The Pagan Megalith, a deep dive into how Black Metal interprets Norwegian and "Viking" history, mythology, and culture, and how those interpretations have shaped the Black Metal scene. I'm your host, Nicholas Kobe, and join me for this voyage of one of music's most extreme genres and one of history's most misunderstood peoples.

Before we start, a few disclaimers. First, viewers should note that all episodes of Under the Pagan Megalith will discuss themes of racism and violence, especially in this episode. Second, this podcast aims to engage in a scholarly discussion of Black Metal's interpretation of Viking history. While many sources will be referenced directly within the episodes, a full list of sources can be found in the description below.

As alluded to in the intro, we've set the stage with the history of Black Metal and the history of the Vikings, both as a historical reality and as a pop culture phenomenon. Now that we've explored different ways Vikings have been interpreted in the lyrics of Black Metal, we're going to shift to discuss the impact that these interpretations have as they cascade out, from Black Metal, and beyond.

The most natural place to start such a complex discussion is with academia. There are more people than you'd expect who have done excellent work unpacking this tangled web of a topic.

Kennet Granholm argues that heathenism in BM can partially be attributed to the phenomena of Orientalism, where a group of people, called an "other," are exoticized and are the subject of fascination because of how different they are. This can be seen throughout human history, such as the Egyptomania of the 1920s or the Renaissance's fascination with the Classical world. Especially in the case of the latter, the "other" is portrayed in a positive light, as something to be aspired to, a dynamic that can readily be applied to some Black Metal's relationship to preChristian Scandinavians, as they "aspire" to return to this idealized version of their past.

Granholm also argues that this "search for authenticity" is at the core of the rebellious and counter-culture nature of rock music. Black Metal, as one of the most extreme forms of rock music, makes sense to have the most extreme ideologies when searching for that authenticity.

It is worth noting the baseline observation that the pop Viking being cartoonishly masculine is a natural marriage with rock and harsher genres of music, as their harshness evokes male ideas of

strength and power. Black Metal is that, to the extreme, forsaking sonic “beauty”, a traditionally feminine trait, in favor of raw power, something very masculine, and in line with the gritty fantasy being sold by pop culture Vikings.

Miroslav Vrzal takes a slightly different approach. Interpreting the church burnings in the early 1990s at the dawn of the second wave of Norwegian Black Metal as a reflection of the terroristic goals of the BM scene.

Vrzal is using the term terrorist in the most literal sense, too, as someone who commits acts to illicit a reaction for political or ideological reasons. In that way, the argument can be made that Black Metal’s church burnings served that purpose, as it drove attention to the scene by broadcasting their message via a violent action.

Following Vrzal’s interpretation, it can be argued that the church burnings were a “success. BM became permanently tied with both Satanism and, eventually, Pagan/Heathenism in Norway because of these massive media incidents.

As we’ve discussed before, Black Metal fluctuated early on, starting as mostly satanic, before some bands began to lean into the Viking of it all. Vrzal sees this switch not as Black Metal being “pro” anything, but rather being anti-Christian. This can also explain their typically surface-level understanding of Viking culture.

Imke Von Helden argues that the correctness of this history may not even matter. Vikings have an established image and ethos in pop culture, and when fans go searching for Viking Metal, they’re more interested in the image rather than the truth.

This provides an important counterargument to the idea of “historical accuracy” in Viking or Black Metal, as the success of these bands may suggest that even if the Vikings were depicted in a historically sound way, it wouldn’t resonate with the same audience or even any audience at all.

This can be seen in one of the most famous Viking-themed Metal bands, Amon Amarth. I’ve neglected to mention Amon Amarth up to this point, mostly because they’re a melodic death metal band, which is very musically and in some ways culturally different than black metal.

Floran Heesch Amon Amarth's portrayal of Vikings in their 2004 song "In Pursuit of Vikings" and how it connects to Romantic ideas of Vikings. Heesh argues that this portrayal, coupled with Amon Amarth's death metal style (deep growled vocals and down-tuned, chugging guitars), invokes this hyper-masculine fantasy of Vikings. On the other hand, Amon Amarth is one of the bands best known for “doing their homework” when it comes to Viking history.

In 2025, members of the band spoke at Inferno Music Conference, alongside former Icelandic President Guðni Th. Jóhannesson and Ben Raffield of Uppsala University in Sweden at a panel called “In Defence of Valhalla," which focused on “protecting” the image of the Vikings from its use by hate groups.

Amon Amarth isn’t alone in pushing back against hate groups using Viking symbols in metal.

Ivar of Enslaved spoke to KVLT Nation about the development of NSBM and how he thinks that the scene properly dealt with it at the time.

“I remember, especially toward the end of the 90s, when there were these bands with a pretty right-wing, brown stain, agenda, and they actually did end up being ostracized enough that they went off and had to create their own NSBM scene. I think that proved a point, and nobody gave in and started being apologetic about the nature of extreme metal, but at the same time, they were very firm and said, " We do not want this to be a part of the scene.

Ivar believes that the fascination of right-wing groups with the Vikings is no different than any other type of religious conservatism.

“People use that in extreme politics, in right-wing politics, but I guess they would use whatever to justify their views. Some days it’s Christianity, other days it’s paganism, and even environmentalism is being used for right-wing reasoning, which is crazy. But even in the socalled modern society, people tend to do that, people use that, I guess, because a lot of it has to do with fear. They go back to whatever seemed to be working or had potent symbolism and hold that as protection against the new, scary reality.”

On a larger scale, there have been movements within black metal that can be seen as counters to NSBM. The most obvious is RABM, or Red and Anarchist Black Metal. The red, in this case, is referencing the color’s association with communism. Bands such as Panopticon, Trisagon, and Ashinspie opt to dissect fascism, bigotry, and capitalism in their lyrics in a way that is equally as intense as the forces they oppose.

These bands showcase how Black Metal can exist in an opposite political space to NSBM. These bands are typically much more blunt with their lyrics, making their message much clearer than a lot of traditional BM bands. Notably, their lyrics also typically avoid mention of Vikings, preferring to focus on direct modern commentary.

Even with these examples, it’s hard to claim that Black Metal is inherently left-leaning. Despite the efforts of books such as *Tonight It’s A World We Bury* by Bill Peel. While both radical leftist politics and Black Metal desire to “tear down the system, early Black Metal rarely takes aim at specific societal faults as leftist politics do. Black Metal revels in its anger, and sonically

unleashing that, but considering the earliest bands rarely dive into what is pissing them off so bad, other than religion, Black Metal's anger at society can just as easily be pointed right or left.

It's, however, easier to argue that Black Metal is inherently right-wing, because the examples of Nazis like Burzum and Absurd are significantly more famous, influential, and older than most RASM. Most RASM bands are still relatively niche. Even more than those two extremes, though, many bands remain vague about their politics. We've covered some more candid moments in interview clips, but most of the actual lyrical content in Black Metal is up for interpretation.

Mayhem's Euronymous, despite being a communist, talks about his decision to include politics in his music, saying, "Even though I'm active in the most extreme communist party here, I leave it to the punks to write about it in their music."

A similar sentiment is shared by Watain's Erik Danielsson, who says, "Black Metal is a cult of Satan, its foundation is the cultivation of chaos and darkness, and no pimple-ridden internet Nazi movement can change that. Stick to your loathsome punk music instead; it suits the greatness of your ideals much better."

Like any sort of non-specificity in art, this allows the audience to relate their own experience to the art. So much music is "generic" in this way because it allows for easier mass consumption. In Black Metal's case, the sonic extremity filters out most of the general audience. However, if you enjoy the harshness, most Black Metal doesn't tell you, one way or the other, why you should feel angry, just that you do.

I'd argue that it is because most of the politics weren't at Black Metal's core, and if they were, they were somewhat obfuscated. Bands like Darkthrone, Bathory, Emperor, and even Mayhem are very apolitical in the lyrics in their most classic albums.

All of that dosen't account for the fact that vocals are not always ment to be intelligible in Black Metal. To peek behind the curtain, a lot of the lyrics used in this podcast were more difficult to gather than any other type of music, metal or otherwise, I've ever covered. If the lyrical message of Black Metal was so important, why wouldn't more of this be easier to get access to?

Black Metal is first and foremost, a musical genre, a harsh one, that is defined primarily by its melodic qualities, and lack thereof. Understanding and finding the lyrics of Black Metal requires much more effort than your average pop song. On one hand, this genre, which has been obsessed with authenticity and rooting out posers, so of course, lyrics are hard to find. However, the simple fact that Black Metal de-emphasised lyrics by nature of its production and composition implies that the genre is much more sonically focused.

We can see this in a lot of early Black Metal. Frankly, these lyrics aren't Shakespeare, nor do they attempt to hit at some deep emotional core. They're evocative and shocking, which fits the genre, but aside from some cherry-picked examples I used in the last episode, they often don't actually tell us anything about the personal beliefs of the artists.

With so little of the identity, aside from the anti-organized religion angle, being tied into the lyrics, it's hard to say that Black Metal is or isn't one way or the other politically. Even with the connections between the Vikings and the alt-right, it's a stretch to assume that this was a secret dog whistle since day one.

In the case of the Vikings, like Satanism, it was baked into the genre early enough and via notable enough bands to have become a hallmark of the genre. However, in the modern era, there are a ton of non-Viking Black Metal bands. As the genre has expanded, it's even harder to pin down a concrete identity for Black Metal, as more bands evolve from the raw, visceral approach of the Black Metal pioneers.

Pitchfork darlings Deafheaven are a good example of that. Their newest record, 2025's *Lonely People With Power,* features a song called "Heathen. However, the song has nothing to do with Vikings. Instead, the idea of "Heathen" or a "non-believer" is taken in the direction of not believing in yourself. To dwell in a pit of depression and loneliness. Not only is this a different interpretation of the word "heathen", but this deeply sad, self-loathing isn't at all congruent with the themes of Viking-centric metal. It's using the imagery of the Vikings, but flipping it for their modern, and more emotional interpretation.

In an example mirroring Deafheaven, Blackbraid uses non-Viking inspiration to address some of the same topics as Viking metal. The one-man, black metal act uses similar lyrical motifs, such as reflecting on colonization, oppression, and a pride and connection with homeland, but is instead filtered through an Indigenous American perspective.

Blackbraid shows ways that the themes of Scandinavian Black Metal can be applied to other cultures, while also not turning racist. The cultural background of Blackbraid is distinctly different from that of the Vikings, considering the culture is still alive and better documented. Regardless of the "accuracy" of Blackbraid's portrayal of Indigenous American culture, Blackbraid's lyrics stay away from the more visceral assertions many Viking-centric metal bands use.

In an interview with Invisible Oranges, when questioned about whether Blackbraid was trying to provide an alternative to the perceived right-wing European bands, Krieger said,

"I wouldn't really say I'm actively pushing back against it, but it definitely gives people an alternative. As far as all that goes, I obviously don't support it, but it's really low on my

radar….It’s a slippery slope, and I really want people to have an alternative to it, but I guess I would say that wasn’t really on my mind when I started Blackbraid. I’m against racism, but I don’t want Blackbraid to be seen as a super political band either because it’s not really about politics.”

This quote is interesting, not only for stating Krieger’s position, but also for how he doesn't want the band to be labeled as "political. This mirrors a lot of the other quotes we’ve heard from Black Metal artists, who, regardless of political affiliation, want to avoid being called “political” at any cost.

An adjacent perspective can be gained from looking at the music of Zeal and Ardor, a band that blends Black Metal with African American Spirituals. The band’s lyrical content is more vehemently anti-racist than either Blackbraid or Deafheaven; however, they’re conveying that message in very “Black Metal” ways. The band leans on Satanist imagery to rebel against a Christian God, forced upon African Slaves via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This mirrors the forcing of Christianity on Vikings, but has instead taken an anti-racist perspective, most likely due to the continuous oppression African-Americans have faced before and since, whereas antiScandinavian racism is far less common, especially in countries like Norway, where they are the majority group.

This can be seen in the other direction, i.e., diversion in genre, but leaning further into heathenism. This mostly manifests in genres such as folk metal and ritual black metal. Ritual Black Metal reflects a more direct, spiritual extension of Black Metal. Similar to standard Black Metal, it’s an evolution into more transgressive material via religion. Some of these artists argue that the spiritual and religious aspects of Black Metal are the “true core” of the genre. They claim that these lyrical themes represent the true breaking from Christian norms, rather than the aggressive sonic elements.

These counterexamples show the varying degrees to which some artists are countering alt-right metal, using some of its themes. However, these are mostly two minority groups within Black Metal. As we can see by the avoidance of direct political commentary, it’s still looked down on to be political, but furthermore, Black Metal is a genre that thrives on independence. Black Metal doesn’t like being “told what to do, so coming into Black Metal, to “respond” to anything within the scene would go over poorly. Bands like Zeal and Ardor and RSBM seem to me more the artists responding to the world, through Black Metal, rather than responding to Black Metal itself. This can also be heard in the music of these bands, which often takes a more experimental or non-traditional approach to Black Metal. This sonically showcases an identity outside of traditional black metal.

On one hand, this shows these bands are thinking outside of Black Metal, which started as a very insular culture. While this still gets bands like Deafheaven called posers, this bucking of

“musical conservatism” can also be simply seen as Black Metal evolving, and artists adapting a wide musical palette to stand out. The latter is more accurate and has been done across Black Metal's political spectrum. It's just worth noting that musical traditionalism is far less common in bands dubbed “anti-NSBM.”

Generally, though, these bands have succeeded due to the quality of their music and their unique sonic characteristics. Dayal Patterson argues that most Black Metal fans don’t care about the political beliefs of the artists that they listen to. Perhaps this is because it takes a certain level of “darkness” to stomach a genre of music built on sounding violent and abrasive, but it could also be that Black Metal fans primarily just focused on the art, rather than the political or sociological implications surrounding it. Patterson argues that Black Metal fans care about the ability to express themselves, but not really any particulars about what that expression should look like.

Black Metal is evolving, as it should, even with how relatively new it is; Black Metal can’t stay stagnant. Despite being relatively niche, Black Metal is very much alive and kicking, decades after its inception. While the strong influence of the Norwegian Black Metal scene and their stylistic approach is baked into the core of Black Metal, as time passes, the genre has expanded musically and lyrically. Like art forms, this can lead to an identity crisis. If Black Metal can be so many different things, then what is Black Metal?

In terms of “philosophy”, the only thing that is really consistent with Black Metal is being against the grain and being an outsider. This identity, based on being “anti-“ rather than “proanything,” may seem unusual, because it is. But that’s what black metal exists to do: be unusual and challenge norms. Tracing the Viking influence on Black Metal, it can be argued that Vikings are just another facet of this identity, just like Satan—opposition in a violent and unrelenting way, just like Black Metal is musically.

Even if we’ve seen that it isn’t the historical reality of the Vikings, a lot of the audience and bands are looking for the fantasy, not the reality. By the time Black Metal was created, the pop culture Viking was already thoroughly established. Looking at the early Black Metal pioneers, Vikings were perceived as the perfect ideological and aesthetic fit. They had conflicts with Christianity, and in the time sense had come to be perceived as intense and vicious, just like Black Metal.

Today, that remains true, not only because the history of Viking imagery in Black Metal has become so ingrained in the culture, but because the pop culture idea of the Viking only continues to be reinforced. Not only through movies, music, and video games, but in real life. When Jacob Anthony Chansley donned a horned headdress to storm the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021, he would be a mascot of the alt-right, and further associated Viking culture with the political right. This thread continues even up to the federal government.

On January 10th, the Department of Labor posted “One Homeland. One People. One Heritage. Remember who you are, American.” on X, echoing the Nazi slogan of Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer, which translates to “One People, one Country [or Empire/Nation], one Leader.” which showcases the similar line of rhetoric, to the extent that it gave me the title of last episode. Similarly, last year, the Department of Homeland Security used a similar type of rhetoric, “A Heritage to be proud of, a Homeland worth Defending.”

Black Metal has become less insular over time, due to its popularity and now accessibility via the internet. This has allowed people from all walks of life to express themselves through this music, who may be vastly different than the Norwegian kids gathering in a dingy basement in Oslo. This expansion has made it now more than ever harder to pin down a list of universal traits in Black Metal. While there is a sort of “family tree” of influence that can be traced back from most modern bands to some of the Norwegian 2nd Wave, it’d be a stretch to say that these bands have anything in common, except for musical style and general negativity. While that’s enough to build a genre, it’s not enough for a philosophy, or one of any unique depth.

Black Metal’s broad negativity does lead to bands like Wolves in the Throne Room twisting sadness into something more positively spiritual; this mission is still rooted in negativity, even if you’re attempting to escape from it. This is all not to say there is anything inherently wrong with Black Metal’s approach.

The genre’s anti-establishment edge can be likened to Punk Rock, and other genres made by outsiders to cope with a world they feel abandoned in. This can provide solace, community, and some sort of sense of power to people who consistently feel pushed down. Just because the genre does not agree on a nuanced, evolving, philosophical, or political stance doesn’t mean Black Metal doesn't serve its purpose. Dayal Patterson argues that Black Metal is too individualistic to support any core “philosophy”, as the ethos of the genre is to be true to yourself and destroy anyone or anything that gets in the way of that. Punk, on the other hand, has a more collectivist nature, which makes it more fitting to a core set of values. Black Metal’s values are as varied as its ever-growing fanbase.

At the end of the day, Black Metal is music first, and genres like pop, rock, country, or hip-hop would also have a hard time nailing down a uniting philosophy in 2026. We just expect it from Black Metal because the culture began so insular. It’s not that all of our analysis has been for naught, but as Black Metal grows, the Vikings are slowly getting drowned out amidst all the new ideas and influences in the genre.

So while Viking Culture will always be embedded in the history of Black Metal, it’s because it was an effective vehicle to express the message of a particular group of people, and still is. As Black Metal reached more people, that tool didn’t work for everyone, and bands have existed without it just fine. This not only allows for more creative freedom, but also allows people to

avoid any potential baggage the complicated history we've laid out through this series may entail.

Black Metal today isn't trapped under the pagan megalith built in by its founders. Bands can come and go from it, taking what influences they want, be it a small chunk or the whole thing. As the Vikings sail further and further away in time, they've proven they'll be remembered, both accurately and inaccurately, forever. Black Metal is just one facet of that, just as the Vikings are one facet of Black Metal. No matter how deep we look back, both Viking history and Black Metal will continue to split the waves and sail into vaster seas.